

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
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Virtual Meeting**

Petition to Form User Experience Section

(Prepared by Faith Charlton, Alison Clemens, Betts Coup, and Zoë Hill.

Special thanks to Shaun Ellis for his contributions.)

BACKGROUND

The archives field has long sought to center users in our work, with recurring professional discourse regarding the need to conduct user experience work -- including user studies and user testing—to support various initiatives. The recently revised DACS Principles codified centering users as not just a desire but an expectation for archival work.¹

The authors of this proposal focused on this issue through our participation in Stanford University’s Lighting the Way (LTW) Working Meeting.² Our individual involvement in inclusive and reparative description, user experience, and/or access work served as a basis for us to think through this significant issue and consider ways to address it. Our LTW white paper recommendations included the creation of a community of practice and the need to foster equitable, long-term professional and institutional support for user experience work.

DISCUSSION

Section Need

Centering users is an imperative in our field, and the need to implement this as a professional priority is underscored by DEI and social justice considerations. Despite the supposed centrality of centering user needs to archival practice, there are currently no guidelines or standards informing user experience work, nor is there a community of practice around performing that work. Although user experience work could inform a wide array of archival practices, no other section is currently focused on this area or has the capacity to do so.

¹ Describing Archives: A Content Standard DACS 2019.0.3 (2020)
https://files.archivists.org/pubs/DACS_2019.0.3_Version.pdf

²M.A. Matienzo and Dinah Handel, eds. 2021. *The Lighting the Way Handbook: Case Studies, Guidelines, and Emergent Futures for Archival Discovery and Delivery*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Libraries.
<https://doi.org/10.25740/gg453cv6438>

The creation of a User Experience Section within SAA will be a major step towards rectifying the lack of regular, routine user experience testing and guidelines for how to implement this work into practice within various contexts, including description, discovery, and access.

Without professional standards, archivists continue to conduct their work in a silo, with many attempts to center users based only on our conceptions of researcher needs.³ Any user testing typically focuses on select groups, most often made up of those who already hold systemic privilege within various institutions, e.g., white academics. Creating this section within SAA will ensure that there is space not only to discuss and create standards for user experience research but to rethink how our archival description and our collections reach our users through various archival systems. Most importantly, the creation of a User Experience Section would help ensure that archival users have an opportunity to make their voices heard, making archival practices more equitable and inclusive. To use descriptive work as an example, a focus on user experience is especially important as it builds on an existing discourse of critical analyses of description work over the past several years, as we have seen a significant increase in interest and focus on inclusive description within the library and archives profession.⁴ A dedicated SAA User Experience Section would allow archivists from various backgrounds and expertise to collaborate, learn and better serve our many users.

The need for user experience work has become even more critical as the archival field has turned its collective attention toward DEI and social justice-related work, including initiatives relating to inclusive and reparative description and content and access mediation as a means to dismantle white supremacy and mitigate harm. However, this work is often done without fully understanding the impact these efforts have on users, particularly those from underrepresented communities, whom these efforts are meant to prioritize. Considering a more expansive view of users of archives, professional discourse surrounding these efforts emphasizes the need to center users through reciprocal community collaboration, including engagement to ensure that these increasingly-adopted practices are in fact reflective of users' lived experiences, are helpful, and mitigate harm.⁵

³ However, one example of changing descriptive practices based on user feedback can be found in: Hintz, Carrie and Quigley, Sarah. "A Matter of Trust: Practical Strategies for Writing User-Centered, Values-Driven Description," *Journal of Archival Organization*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2020.1806615>

⁴ See, among many others: Tai, Jessica. "Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* (Vol. 3: Radical Empathy in Archives, 2020) <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jelis/article/view/120>; Tonia Sutherland, "Redescription as Restorative Justice" LDL Speaker Series (November 2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOs_r6D9lNk; Annie Tang, Dorothy Berry, Rachel Winston, and Kelly Bolding. "Toward Culturally Competent Archival (Re)Description of Marginalized Histories." Papers presented at the Society of American Archivists Annual Conference, Washington, DC, August 2018. <https://archives2018.sched.com/event/ESld/101-toward-culturally-competent-archival-redescription-of-marginalized-histories>; Arroyo-Ramirez, Elvia, Molly Brown, Dinah Handel, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, Rachel Mattson, Giordana Mecagni, Holly Smith, and Kelly Wooten. "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice." Presentation, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Portland, OR, July 2017. <https://archives2017.sched.com/event/ABGy/301-radical-empathy-in-archival-practice>; Bolding, Kelly, Faith Charlton, Betts Coup, Cate Peebles, Jennifer Garcon. "Implementing Inclusive (Re)Description at Predominantly White Institutions." Presentation, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, August 2020.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The creation of this Section would provide a professional space for a user experience community of practice and standards to emerge. Building a community of practice in this area would also assure that usability work can be carried out in a way that is supported by peer-to-peer and professional organizational conversations and resources and informed by standards and guidelines. The proposed section would be able to advocate for user experience work in archives and could provide resources to assist with it (e.g., testing scripts, usability toolkits, professional communication channels). We anticipate that the work of this section would benefit from close partnerships with other SAA sections, including Accessibility and Disability; Description; Issues and Advocacy; Encoded Archival Standards; Archives Management; Reference, Access, and Outreach; and the identity-based sections, as well as the Standards Committee and the Committee on Research, Data, and Assessment (CORDA). It would also benefit from a potential partnership with the SAA Committee on Education and the SAA Education Department to develop educational opportunities related to user experience, as described further in the Section Goals section of this petition.

The SAA membership—as well as librarians and archivists broadly speaking—have positively and resolutely supported a petition the authors of this proposal sent to the community to form a User Experience Section. *The petition reached the 100-member minimum for endorsement within twelve hours of being circulated.* By the time of this petition submission, 208 positive votes were collected (176 of them being self-reported SAA members in good standing). 170 respondents, both SAA and non-SAA members, said they would participate if the section was established. We also received positive feedback from the Accessibility and Disability Section Steering Committee, stating that they are in support of the formation of this section. Comments and feedback were overwhelmingly positive, including the following selected comments:

“With developing archival commitments to participatory description processes, sharing authority, and centering users/community stakeholders, lessons from the field of user experience can support archival work by lending their conceptual frameworks and methodologies to the archival domain. A user experience section within SAA would be helpful in bringing together archivists and user experience professionals to further nurture this connection.”

“Heading a new public services unit within our special collections/archives and having just completed a UX study of our online research tools (Aeon, ASpace, and our website), I have a vested interest in this group. Throughout my career, I have found the user at the core of my work more and more yet the RAO section doesn't always address specific user issues or behaviors in their discussions and programming.”

“User experience is an essential (and often overlooked) component of the archival enterprise. It's high time that SAA has a group devoted to this discipline!”

“I think this is an important area of focus for the archival field, and especially for under-served users/researcher communities.”

“User experience is a critical piece to better serve our communities. Dedicating time/space to think about the way all users (staff, researchers, new to archives

researchers, and the wider community) interact with our finding aids, our interfaces, etc. is needed. Having its own section or including it into another relevant section like collection management would benefit the profession.”

“I fully support the formation of a section that centers users and seeks to better understand how to improve user experiences with archives. We conducted user experience interviews with guidance and participation from a UX professional for a recent digital archives project I directed, and that work was invaluable for understanding how our users interact with our digital archival materials and what they expect a site to do. This sort of user engagement should be a part of all of our work.”

“Thank you for moving this forward. Better understanding of how, why, and where researchers are finding and using archives is essential for building better systems, tools, infrastructure, and staff development.”

“This area is very undertheorized and key to the goals of archival practice. Hopefully this helps practitioners come together to better understand users' needs & to create more accessible, responsive systems for our users.”

“Access is the point for almost all collecting, and archivists should be better about understanding the user experience. With the increasing number of various platforms, in addition to ArchivesSpace / CDM, it will be useful to have a group to discuss these issues.”

“This is long overdue! I'm actively engaged in user experience work at my institution and would very much appreciate being part of a community that meshes archival professional knowledge with UX/UI.”

“Archival research has historically been a struggle for the uninitiated. I have seen this first hand as a User Experience Research professional who has been working with archivists to increase the usability of online Finding Aids at [my library] for the past decade. I fully support this proposed SAA section because in order for libraries and archives to be as user-centered as they profess to be, user experience work must be included as part of regular practice and valued within the professional community.

An SAA User Experience Section will help institutions change their mindset too. For example, although I have been working with archivists for ten years, [my library] won't sponsor my attendance at SAA since I am not an archivist and does not see involvement with SAA as relevant to my work. This would help me make the case that SAA is in fact seeking professional collaboration in this area, and it is relevant to my work, hence the "maybe" answer in the previous participation question.”

As part of the positive comments, three respondents specifically said that the creation and existence of this Section would prompt them to renew their SAA memberships, or to be able to better make the case for their involvement in SAA.

As demonstrated in this petition, there is a strong need for a community of practice focused on user experience work within archives. We believe that SAA is the best place for this community of practice to emerge, and that the formation of the proposed User Experience Section is the most effective way to create and foster this community. We understand that the SAA Council is currently reviewing how sections operate, but we believe that the need for this section is strong enough that its formation should be approved at this time. If SAA is unable to accommodate the creation of this section, the authors of this petition are dedicated enough to the creation of this community of practice that we would seek another institutional home for the group, which we think would not be in the Society's best interests. We hope, therefore, that this petition will be approved and that we can move forward with hosting this community work within SAA.

Section Goals

We hope that this section might begin by developing a set of principles to guide user experience testing in archives, including testing and research methodologies that measure the impact of changes to descriptive content, interface design, and functionality. We hope that these principles will be accompanied by a toolkit of scalable, customizable user and usability testing approaches and script templates. These guidelines and toolkit would provide an entry point for those conducting user experience research as part of their practice. It could be maintained and supplemented as testing approaches develop and change over time. The toolkit should include feedback from those who have used it, in order to inform future testing decisions by archivists at repositories of various sizes, budgets, and audiences. We think that the proposed section is the best place to create and manage the principles and toolkit, as hosting this work in the proposed section would ensure a long-term focus on user experience in archival practice and formalize the community of practice.

The archival community places a strong emphasis on shared standards, guidelines, and best practices. Creating standards and guidelines to inform user experience studies within archives would give validity to user experience work within our field and would allow library workers to ground their user experience work in a larger interprofessional context, no matter the size or budget of their institution.

We also see the potential for this Section to create and foster formal, paid and informal, openly-available educational resources and opportunities. We hope the Section might collaborate with SAA Education, potentially developing coursework related to user experience. Though one course is presently available, [User Experience Design and Digital Archives](#), there is opportunity for coursework related to user experience of finding aid sites, the usability of description, and much more. In a conversation with the authors of this petition, CODA expressed interest in collaborating with a User Experience Section and SAA Education to develop a variety of courses and potentially an additional SAA certification program in User Experience. Developing a community of practice around user experience work via this proposed Section would set the groundwork for increased demand and opportunities for education in this area. This would allow the SAA education curriculum to grow into a new area in the field, giving archivists working at a broad range of institutions greater opportunity to develop user experience-related skills.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the SAA Council approve the creation of a new User Experience Section.

Support Statement: The SAA membership—as well as librarians and archivists broadly speaking—have positively and resolutely supported a petition the authors of this proposal sent to the community to form a User Experience Section. By the time of this petition submission, 208 positive votes were collected (176 of them being self-reported SAA members in good standing).

Impact on Strategic Priorities: The creation of a User Experience Section will help SAA meet all four goals identified in its Strategic Plan. It will provide educational resources and mentorship, it will foster both internal and external collaboration (for example, with the Digital Libraries Foundation Technology Strategy for Archives Working Group) in developing a robust and scalable community of practice such that archivists at all repositories will be able to employ; it will facilitate opportunities for the archival profession to conduct much needed research to inform the development of new guidelines and best practices for archival description, discovery and access based on evidence of user needs; and it will provide support and advocacy opportunities for archivists and information professionals whose work focuses in user experience, as well as archivists who would like to be able to perform user experience work who currently feel that they lack the skills to do so.

Fiscal Impact: The cost of creating this Section would be the same as creating any other section, including responding to member requests, generating reports to/from SAA Council, competing for other resources offered by SAA, and the SAA Governance Manager's time. We understand that staff time would be required to maintain the section microsite and other online resources, run annual elections, handle annual meetings and reporting, and provide general support, just as with any other SAA section. However, this Section has the added benefit of potentially leading to SAA's development of paid educational resources focused on User Experience, which could have a positive fiscal impact for the Society.

Petition signatures

Are you an SAA member?	What is your name?	Are you in support of this section being formed? If you say yes, your name will be included as a signature on our petition to SAA Council.
Yes	Alexander Duryee	Yes
Yes	Sarah Newhouse	Yes
Yes	Melanie Wisner	Yes
Yes	Bryan Whitledge	Yes
Yes	Sheridan Sayles	Yes
Yes	Carrie Hintz	Yes
Yes	Caitlin Rizzo	Yes
Yes	Sarah Oswald	Yes
Yes	Frances Lyons	Yes
Yes	Barbara Gombach	Yes
Yes	Lori Dedeyan	Yes
Yes	Jacob Griffith-Rosenberger	Yes
Yes	Simon Ragovin	Yes
Yes	Max Goldberg	Yes
Yes	Max Eckard	Yes
Yes	Robert Clark	Yes
Yes	Sarah Pratt Martin	Yes
Yes	Laura Bell	Yes
Yes	Kit Messick	Yes
Yes	Michelle Ganz	Yes
Yes	Jennifer Coggins	Yes
Yes	Maria Shellman	Yes
Yes	Susan Earle	Yes
Yes	Kate Neptune	Yes
Yes	Ryder Kouba	Yes
Yes	Alexandra deGraffenreid	Yes
Yes	Karen Gracy	Yes
Yes	Emily Lapworth	Yes

Yes	William Coates	Yes
Yes	Jodi Allison-Bunnell	Yes
Yes	Pamela S. M. Hopkins	Yes
Yes	Eve Neiger	Yes
Yes	Lara Friedman-Shedlov	Yes
Yes	Tamar Zeffren	Yes
Yes	Hallel Yadin	Yes
Yes	Chris S. Ervin	Yes
Yes	Jessica Chapel	Yes
Yes	Sarah Schmidt	Yes
Yes	Steven Gentry	Yes
Yes	Jacqueline Rider	Yes
Yes	Shianne Hargrove	Yes
Yes	Jill Severn	Yes
Yes	Johanna Carll	Yes
Yes	Kira Dietz	Yes
Yes	Paul Conway	Yes
Yes	Jennifer E King	Yes
Yes	Jennifer Fauxsmith	Yes
Yes	Christine Weideman	Yes
Yes	Victoria J Jesswein	Yes
Yes	Tanya Zanish-Belcher	Yes
Yes	Danielle Emerling	Yes
Yes	Jessica Tai	Yes
Yes	Micha Broadnax	Yes
Yes	Kelsey Duinkerken	Yes
Yes	Rusty Heckaman	Yes
Yes	Maureen Cresci Callahan	Yes
Yes	Elizabeth Jones-Minsinger	Yes
Yes	Ashley Williams	Yes
Yes	Adrien Hilton	Yes
Yes	Michelle Sweetser	Yes
Yes	Sara A. Borden, CA	Yes
Yes	Kevin Schlottmann	Yes
Yes	Karla Irwin	Yes

Yes	Erin Mustard	Yes
Yes	Nora Zimmerman	Yes
Yes	Jordon Steele	Yes
Yes	Rachel Jirka	Yes
Yes	Beth Lander	Yes
Yes	Emily Higgs	Yes
Yes	Greta Suiter	Yes
Yes	Linda Hocking	Yes
Yes	Rose Oliveira	Yes
Yes	Yekaterina Shraga	Yes
Yes	Charlene Peacock	Yes
Yes	Weatherly Stephan	Yes
Yes	Michele Combs	Yes
Yes	Diana Marsh	Yes
Yes	Amy C. Vo	Yes
Yes	Kashonda Murphy	Yes
Yes	Elizabeth Maycumber	Yes
Yes	Cara Bertram	Yes
Yes	Brittany N. Alleman Ayers	Yes
Yes	Eleanor Blackman	Yes
Yes	Hillel Arnold	Yes
Yes	Chelsea Reil	Yes
Yes	Sheon Montgomery	Yes
Yes	Martha Adem Alvarez	Yes
Yes	Dana Lamparello	Yes
Yes	Sarah Bush	Yes
Yes	Jennifer Gunter King	Yes
Yes	Renae Rapp	Yes
Yes	Jill Waycie	Yes
Yes	Kimberlee Roberts	Yes
Yes	Margaret Turman Kidd	Yes
Yes	Dara Baker	Yes
Yes	Arielle Petrovich	Yes
Yes	Rachel Van Unen	Yes

Yes	Laura Melbourne	Yes
Yes	Erica Boudreau	Yes
Yes	Heather Bidzinski	Yes
Yes	Andrew Russell	Yes
Yes	Lindsay Wittwer	Yes
Yes	Gordon Daines	Yes
Yes	Bonnie Marie Sauer	Yes
Yes	Kate Thornhill	Yes
Yes	Amy E. Armstrong	Yes
Yes	Celeste Brewer	Yes
Yes	Austin Justice	Yes
Yes	Jessica Perkins	Yes
Yes	Rita Johnston	Yes
Yes	Amanda McKnight	Yes
Yes	Gayle Schechter	Yes
Yes	Donald Force	Yes
Yes	Susan Swiatosz	Yes
Yes	Courtney Dean	Yes
Yes	Quin DeLaRosa	Yes
Yes	Anna Reznik	Yes
Yes	Sara Shutkin	Yes
Yes	Tracy MacMath	Yes
Yes	Isabella Fidanza	Yes
Yes	Jerry Simmons	Yes
Yes	Heather Lember	Yes
Yes	Waverly Lowell	Yes
Yes	Julia Corrin	Yes
Yes	Karen Shumilla	Yes
Yes	Rachael Hu	Yes
Yes	Maryam Momeni	Yes
Yes	Mary Kidd	Yes
Yes	Kit Fluker	Yes
Yes	Jenifer Monger	Yes

Yes	Matthew Lincoln	Yes
Yes	Matthew Balcer	Yes
Yes	Barbara Spence Orsolits PhD	Yes
Yes	Amelia Holmes	Yes
Yes	Kevin Clair	Yes
Yes	chloe pfendler	Yes
Yes	Adrian Turner	Yes
Yes	Lisa Rickey	Yes
Yes	Jim Kay	Yes
Yes	Pam bell	Yes
Yes	VivianLea Solek	Yes
Yes	Laura Starratt	Yes
Yes	Caitlin Birch	Yes
Yes	Marietta Carr	Yes
Yes	Jean Maria Arrigo	Yes
Yes	Julie Rockwell	Yes
Yes	Jessica Koenig	Yes
Yes	Allison Chomet	Yes
Yes	Akeem Flavors	Yes
Yes	Leah Early	Yes
Yes	Meredith Evans	Yes
Yes	Samantha Crisp	Yes
Yes	Ashley Gray	Yes
Yes	Zachary Tumlin	Yes
Yes	Pamela Campbell	Yes
Yes	Natalie Johnson Pearmain	Yes
Yes	Hilary Swett	Yes
Yes	Blake Relle	Yes
Yes	Erin McBrien	Yes
Yes	Steve Duckworth	Yes
Yes	Jenna Finan	Yes
Yes	Virginia Schneider	Yes

Yes	Kristen Diehl	Yes
Yes	Gregory Wiedeman	Yes
Yes	Eric Hung	Yes
Yes	Irene Gates	Yes
Yes	Stephanie Bennett Rahmat	Yes
Yes	Katherine Martinez	Yes
Yes	Faith Charlton	Yes
Yes	Jessica Geiser	Yes
Yes	Dawn Schmitz	Yes
Yes	Mara Gregory	Yes
Yes	Christina Wolak	Yes
Yes	María A. Matienzo	Yes