

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
August 3, 2020
VIRTUAL MEETING**

**Council Working Group: Sections Assessment
(Prepared by Audra Eagle Yun, Eric Chin, and Ricky Punzalan)**

The SAA Council Working Group on Sections Assessment, created by the SAA Council in December 2019, met on February 14, 2020, via phone. In attendance were Eric Chin, Ricky Punzalan, and Audra Eagle Yun. The group addressed the following: “To consider options for strengthening and ensuring the sustainability of member affinity groups.”

The Working Group presented a verbal update at the March 2020 SAA Council meeting, including several recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The large number of affinity groups (specifically, 46 sections) in the Society present a challenge to the SAA Council and staff in terms of responsiveness to elections, assistance with governance, fiscal oversight, and other support. This has been a recurring issue in the Society for many years,¹ exacerbated by ongoing concerns about member involvement in section leadership as well as active member participation in these sections. Some sections struggle to identify a slate of candidates to run for positions. Others have a small group of active volunteers, which makes it appear harder for newer members of the profession to step up into leadership positions.

The sections hold an important role in SAA, as they may serve to foster membership development, steward future leaders of the Society, provide advocacy on issues, establish professional identity and knowledge development, and facilitate mentorship networks. However, the Council has expressed concern that the large number of available section choices may overwhelm members, overly spread out programming and content and, ultimately, lead to internal competition for limited resources and member bandwidth.

Prior to the December 2019, meeting, Council members were asked to evaluate the general activity level and member engagement of the sections that they serve as liaison. The results were compiled for Council members to review during the meeting. The Council had a robust discussion of the status of SAA’s 46 sections’ member engagement and activities, and then formed the Working Group on Sections Assessment.

¹ See Task Force on Membership Affinity Groups report, November 2014.
<http://files.archivists.org/governance/reports/1114-VII-E-MembAffinityGroupsTF.pdf>

The Working Group’s recommendations in March 2020 were:

- To consider modifying the 2020 Leadership Orientation and Forum to foster conversations with new/continuing leaders about “creating our future” in terms of ways to connect as sections, gather ideas about shifts in the governance structure, etc.
- To encourage Council liaison conversations with section leadership more informally, with talking points, to prompt leaders to do general exploration of the “health” of their sections, as to create a shared space for Council members to continue the assessment process.
- To work with SAA staff to create a section leadership survey oriented toward health of the sections, or consider modifying the section annual reports to include question(s) about health, future plans, and needs.
- To encourage the Executive Committee and staff to consider providing space, in 2021 or 2022, for “affinity groups”² to have joint sessions at a larger scale as a pilot, without expectations for permanent changes.

This Discussion Item is being submitted as part of an effort to continually gather feedback from members to ensure that any governance shifts are well-informed by members and section leadership.

DISCUSSION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, plans for implementation of these action items were tabled in March 2020. We seek the Council’s input into what is actionable now and in the coming year.

Immediate past and incoming section leaders should be involved in self-assessment activities. Some sections have experimented with joint meetings, while others acknowledge years of inactivity.

The 2020 Leadership Orientation and Forum will include time to discuss section sustainability and gather ideas and recommendations for structural change.

The Council can choose to approve the recommendations below or discuss additional or alternative options to continue the work of section assessment in the coming year and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the SAA Council support and pursue the following actions:

² The phrase “affinity groups” is used in this context to denote related component groups that comprise committees, task forces, sections, etc. The SAA Council has considered “affinity groups” as a way to facilitate umbrella-like connections and mergers among similarly focused component groups within SAA.

- Modify the 2020 Leadership Orientation and Forum to foster conversations with new/continuing leaders about “creating our future” in terms of ways to connect as sections, gather ideas about shifts in the governance structure, etc.
- Have Council liaison conversations with section leaders more informally, with talking points, to encourage leaders to do general exploration of the “health” of their sections; create a shared space for Council members to continue the assessment process.
- Work with SAA staff to create a section leadership survey oriented to determining the health of the sections, or consider modifying the section annual reports to include question(s) about health, future plans, and needs.
- Ask the Executive Committee and staff to consider providing space, in 2021 or 2022, for “affinity groups” to have joint sessions at a larger scale as a pilot, without expectations for permanent changes. Section leaders should be involved in identifying affinity groups.
- As a Council, continue to explore models for affiliated groups to be consolidated and more broadly affiliated, as member input and leader participation is incorporated and better understood.

Support Statement: SAA strives to encourage member engagement, develop leaders in the profession, and streamline the Society’s processes. Taking these actions will continue the work of ensuring efficient, accessible organizational resources and a more open and collaborative organization for our members.

Impact on Strategic Priorities: The proposed recommendation addresses all of SAA’s strategic priorities, including and especially the strategic actions (4.1 to 4.4) falling under Goal #4: Meeting Members’ Needs; Goal #2.4. Foster communities for professional interaction; and Goal #3.3. Participate actively in relevant partnerships and collaborations to enhance professional knowledge.

Fiscal Impact: Fiscal impact is anticipated to be in the form of cost savings to SAA, including costs related to programming and projects, meeting room rental and technical support, and SAA staff time.