

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
September 23, 2020
Virtual Meeting**

**Final Report:
2020 Joint Annual Meeting Program Committee
(Prepared by Co-Chairs Jillian Cuellar, Jennifer Meehan, and Tom Ruller)**

2020 Program Committee members: April Anderson-Zorn, Linda Avetta, Jillian Cuellar (SAA co-chair), Thuy Vo Dang, Angel Diaz, Cesar Gallegos, Carrie Hintz, Jasmine Jones, Jennifer Meehan (SAA co-chair) Jaimie Quaglino, Allen Ramsey, Tom Ruller (CoSA co-chair), Cassie Schmitt, and Jessica Tai.

The committee would like to acknowledge and thank Nancy Beaumont, Felicia Owens, Matt Black, Carlos Salgado, and Barbara Teague for their tremendous support, wise counsel, and unparalleled ability to pivot and adapt to an unprecedented set of circumstances.

Conference Theme and Call for Proposals

The Winter 1994 issue of the *American Archivist* was a special issue that presented perspectives on change during the next few decades. The special issue was titled *2020 Vision*. The 2020 Annual Meeting program committee took seriously the concept of imagining the future of archives and the role of archives within institutions and society in general in the coming decades. The committee recognized the importance and value of partnerships and the role of creativity in adapting to a changing world and ensuring the continued relevance and value of archival repositories. The committee settled on the theme of “Creating our Future” where education sessions that stress creativity and adaptability would fuel discussion, new ideas, and innovation that highlight the ingenuity of our colleagues, as well as inspire and challenge us to continue charting new directions for our profession.

The committee also recognized the role of the annual meeting in building a more inclusive and open profession, where dialogue is encouraged, all perspectives are given equal voice and existing power and privilege structures are challenged. To achieve that objective, the call for papers encouraged proposals that challenge the profession’s traditional and dominant discourse; required appropriate representation by a diversity of presenters, especially non-archivists who can help the profession grow in knowledge, competence, understanding and relevance; and required appropriate representation by and about marginalized communities.

The conference co-chairs authored an article about the 2020 SAA/CoSA Joint Annual Meeting for the February 2020 issue of *Archival Outlook* to encourage proposals.

Education Sessions, Posters, and Pop-Ups

A total of 171 session proposals and 40 poster proposals were received by the deadline. The entire committee, with the exception of Co-chair Jillian Cuellar, met in Chicago in January and selected 65 education sessions and 30 poster sessions. The committee left five open slots for pop-up sessions.

Sessions were reviewed carefully to ensure that the program provided a balance of session topics and industries. At the end of the meeting in Chicago, the Program Committee felt confident that we had developed a strong program that would have broad appeal with minimal situations in which sessions of similar topics or industries would compete, and that our objectives to build a more inclusive and open annual meeting were honored.

And then the global pandemic began.

Pivoting to an Entirely Online Conference

The decision by the SAA Council to move the 2020 Annual Meeting to an all-virtual program required the Program Committee and SAA staff to quickly shift our focus from shepherding our existing meeting plan through to fruition to re-designing the annual meeting in a way that still featured the excellent content of the educational sessions selected by the Program Committee.

Under the expert guidance of SAA staff and in consideration of technical and logistical factors, the Program Committee chairs determined that the program would consist of a combination of live broadcast sessions and pre-recorded, on-demand sessions. There would be two days of live broadcast sessions, followed by several weeks (possibly months) of on-demand, pre-recorded sessions. We decided that the live broadcast sessions would focus on those that would be of high interest to the broadest spectrum of participants, would translate well to an on-line delivery method, and would sufficiently represent both topical and industry areas. The entire Program Committee met via Zoom in May to select a total of 12 educational sessions that would be offered via live broadcast. This activity also identified several alternates, in case any of the selected sessions were not able to participate, and reserved four slots for pop-up sessions.

Program Committee members were assigned to reach out to session chairs to confirm that they and the session participants would be willing and able to participate in a live broadcast session. Critical to the success of live broadcast sessions were the feasibility of adapting session plans as needed and participants' availability prior to or during the scheduled time as well as technical capability to record the session and participate live in Q&A. Several of the selected sessions declined the opportunity to participate in the 2020 meeting, which led to several of the alternates being recruited to present. In the end, only one of the live broadcast sessions was offered "live" (with participants presenting in real time), while the rest of the live broadcast sessions were pre-recorded with live Q&A discussion following the recorded portion.

A call for pop-up proposals was issued; 17 proposals were received and voted on by CoSA and SAA members; and the Program Committee chairs selected four pop-up sessions and two

alternates based on the rankings by vote with consideration for diversity of speakers and balance with the live broadcast educational sessions.

At the same time, SAA staff contacted each session chair of the on-demand sessions to confirm availability and capacity to prepare a pre-recorded session and to be available for a live follow-up question-and-answer session. Several sessions self-determined that the topic and method of their session would not translate well to online delivery. Ultimately there were a total of 50 pre-recorded sessions.

The pivot to an online conference would not have been possible without the hard work of analyzing and selecting education sessions that occurred in January. This activity provided the members of the Program Committee with knowledge and understanding of the content and background of presenters. This understanding was critical in confirming that the conference, as originally designed, could translate to an entirely online platform.

Conference Experience

The 2020 SAA/CoSA Joint Annual Meeting was the best-attended annual conference in SAA's history, with 2,582 individuals registering for the conference. The conference also saw the largest attendance of CoSA member representatives, with at least 250 state archives staff attending (compared with a more typical attendance of 40 to 45 and the previous attendance record of 70).

In addition to the education sessions selected by the Program Committee, the conference offered the full range of opportunities, including a Research Forum, section and committee meetings, a vendor exhibit hall, business meetings, and member-organized networking opportunities. The online experience was organized and scheduled to provide a high-quality presentation with appropriate introductory content, scheduling, and follow-up. In addition, the online experience was organized to accommodate the multiple time zones of attendees. Finally, the online experience was planned to limit "screen fatigue" to ensure that participants were able to be fully engaged throughout the live portion of the conference.

Observations and Feedback

The key take-away from this annual conference experience is that it worked—and worked well. The initial feedback from participants indicates that, like previous in-person conferences, 80% of attendees rated the education sessions good, very good, or excellent. Fewer than 5% rated the sessions as poor. Attendance at the live sessions was excellent and the numbers would not have been possible at an in-person meeting.

We have asked ourselves what were the critical success factors that made this annual meeting the tremendous success that it was. Here is a short list:

- Excellent preparation and understanding of the session proposals through the traditional committee vetting process that occurred in January.

- An understanding of the requirements of online delivery by conference presenters, several of whom self-selected themselves out of the conference based on an understanding of the requirements.
- Excellent, high-quality production technology that made each session attractive, interactive, and relatively free of technical problems.
- Patience, understanding, and an almost-24-hour problem-solving ethic on the part of the SAA staff. No participant issue was left unaddressed.
- A conference program that contained a broad spectrum of sessions that addressed the interests of a wide variety of members from both a topical and industry perspective.
- A conference pace that gave attendees time to meet personal needs, refresh their minds and bodies, and remain fully engaged in each session.
- Well-prepared presenters who delivered strong content that was meaningful and useful to participants.

Technically, the conference is still ongoing, with pre-recorded sessions continuing to be offered and question and answer sessions continuing to be held.

Final Comments and Recommendations

The 2020 Joint Annual Meeting of CoSA and SAA was organized and delivered in an extremely short amount of time. The four months between the decision to hold an all-virtual conference and the delivery of the conference itself, within the context of tremendous institutional, personal, and financial uncertainty, made for very rapid decision-making, several compromises, and a lot of very hard work. Should the SAA Council decide that future conferences will be entirely online, making the decision soon would give even more time to bring together an excellent conference. At the same time, we encourage continued reliance on a clear call for proposals, organization of a program committee that can bring perspectives representing a variety of topics and industry areas, and maintenance of policies and practices that govern participation in the annual meeting.

The Program Committee's work is appropriately conducted without knowledge of the backgrounds of session presenters. We observed that the diversity of conference presenters continues to be limited. We encourage the designers of A*CENSUS II to consider ways to gather data that will aid in diversifying session proposals and finding ways to encourage diversity in the profession and ultimately support greater diversity in the annual meeting program.

In addition, the 2020 Program Committee recommends that the 2021 call for proposals include a modified diversity and inclusion statement. The 2020 Program Committee members observed that the diversity and inclusivity (D&I) statement in our call for proposals was interpreted in many different ways. This included references to personal and/or professional experiences, perspectives, and identities; organizational affiliation or mission; donor identities; and user or target community identities. We recognize the D&I statement's aim in ensuring representation across the program. However, we find that there is room for improvement in how we present the statement in the submission form, recognizing that applicants would benefit from further guidance on how to construct a D&I statement that reads less as a "check list" and more as a narrative of how panelists' individual positionalities affect their approach to their work. A more detailed review and

recommendation was prepared by committee members Jessica Tai, Carrie Hintz, Jasmine Jones, and Jaimie Quaglino. Link to full document:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hc7ONRso7pJHSuolHWgKAhyngwy_FZUdQgwa9cL-NhM/edit?ts=5e399a06

Suggested changes to the SAA Annual Meeting’s program proposal form:

One of SAA’s core values is “Ensuring the diversity of its membership and leaders, the profession, and the archival record.” We expect program sessions to reflect this commitment to a diverse and inclusive program and profession. As each session is composed of individuals and/or organizations with varied personal and professional experiences, perspectives, and identities, please indicate how – in a summative way – your proposal embodies individual, institutional, or geographic diversity, or supports the development, inclusion, and stewardship of a diverse profession or cultural record.

This could include positionality statements that reflect on the unique identities of the panelists in relation to the work they will discuss, a recognition of dominant positionality inherent in your identity or organization, or the way privilege and power manifests in the session and how you will use or respond to it. Situating your proposal in the larger context of the profession and community helps the program committee evaluate a wide variety of proposals, and ultimately contributes to a more balanced program.