

SAA Membership Committee Survey on Barriers to Participation

Report submitted to SAA Council by the Membership Committee, June 2017

2016-2017 Membership Committee:

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Background

At the 2016 SAA Annual Meeting, the Membership Committee received a directive from SAA Council to gather information about barriers to participating in SAA from the general membership, and discuss and recommend ways to break down these barriers. The Committee first addressed this task by informally surveying members through casual conversation at the annual meeting and within our individual professional networks, and identified the following common barriers:

- Insufficient funding to attend annual meeting
- Insufficient time to commit to active involvement
- Assumption that leadership positions are only available to those who attend annual meeting
- Lack of professional connections
- Desire to get to know SAA before becoming actively involved

The Committee used this feedback to create multiple choice questions for a survey distributed to the general membership for more comprehensive data on barriers to participation. The Committee and SAA staff disseminated the survey via In the Loop, the SAA website, the Archives & Archivists List, and the SAA Leaders list. The survey was open for approximately 1 month, from late February to late March 2017. 1,279 people responded.

In the survey, the Committee defined "participation" as active involvement in an SAA group, contributing to an email list or social media, volunteering as a mentor, attending the Annual Meeting or a workshop, or partaking in other activities or initiatives. The survey consisted of the

following three questions, which provided a free text response option in addition to choices that could be selected concurrently. Responses are attached as appendices I and II.

1. Are you satisfied with your current level of participation in SAA?
2. If you do not participate, or are unsatisfied with your level of participation, what are the barriers you face?
3. Additional feedback about participation in SAA

Key Findings and Observations

Response to question 1 tells us that roughly half of the respondents (about 665) have a desire to be more involved in SAA. We see this as a good problem because it demonstrates a desire to engage with the organization. It also reveals that a number of members aren't satisfied with their involvement, which should be unpacked. We hope that by assessing the most common barriers faced by our members, we will gain a more nuanced understanding of complex professional lives of SAA members, and will be able to suggest realistic methods of breaking down these barriers.

Response to question 2 tells a bigger picture:

The top two barriers to participation are expense and time. Members do not receive adequate funding from their institutions to travel to the annual meeting and stay at a hotel, and they struggle to cover costs out of pocket. Many temporary and contract archivists are not paid when taking time off for professional development activities. Members are stretched in their jobs, coursework, and family lives. These issues are longstanding, widespread, and difficult to address.

The third most common barrier is that members new to the profession do not feel experienced enough to get involved in SAA. It is understandable that a student or new professional should want to take a year or two after joining SAA to get oriented to the organization and become familiar with the opportunities for involvement, and this should be respected. However, we also believe it is important to engage new members with the organization so they feel valued and included in the profession. Furthermore, SAA benefits from the skills and perspectives of new members.

The fourth most common barrier is the lack of clarity on how to participate. We interpret this as is a communication issue. SAA leadership forms a large and complex organization of groups and subgroups that intimidates new members. We need to acknowledge the learning curve members face in participating in SAA, and consider how our organizational structure and systems of communication can obstruct engagement.

The fifth most common barrier is simply not being appointed to a position after volunteering. Some members described unsuccessful attempts at participating (rejected conference session proposals, submitting volunteer the form but not being selected) and have become discouraged from repeated failures and/or never hearing follow-up. This is a frustrating experience. While we want all members to feel welcome to participate at the level they feel most comfortable, we also

think it is important for leadership positions to remain competitive. SAA leadership is most effective when individuals are committed to serving in their positions, and the application process helps to ensure the value of holding a leadership position or presenting in the annual meeting program.

Response to question 3 and feedback in free-text “other” options in questions 1 and 2 were analyzed together. Feedback was diverse and revealing. The most common themes include the following, roughly in order of predominance:

- It is difficult to participate while unemployed, in a temporary position, or when one lacks a professional network. This speaks to economic and professional privilege enjoyed by members with permanent jobs.
- Leadership and general membership feels cliquish. Respondents expressed that one seems to have to know people in SAA in order to get involved.
- Annual meeting programming and communication from SAA seems to predominantly focus on issues relating to archives at large established universities, which does not necessarily serve members at small institutions, corporate agencies, or government archives. Thus, opportunities to participate do not necessarily align with professional interests.
- Channels for participation are not clear.
- Some members face a lack of support from their employers, managers, and colleagues in participating in SAA. This goes beyond a lack of funding. Institutional culture does not always support using work hours for service in professional associations, making time devoted to SAA a larger burden for some members.
- Several respondents, both young and old, experience ageism in SAA. This is alienating, and prevents some members from seeing themselves reflected in the organization.
- Some respondents indicated that they felt alienated by the seemingly predominant liberal politics of SAA leadership and general membership. Additionally, the A&A listserv is perceived as politically combative from both sides of the political spectrum, and is intimidating.
- Some members who have previously served in leadership positions did not find the experience fulfilling and therefore have not sought new opportunities for participation.

Additional observations on free-text responses:

It is clear that many members experience feelings of intimidation and unwelcomeness that contribute to their hesitation to participate in SAA. These include: perception of cliquish leadership and membership; first-time annual meeting attendees intimidated by the size of the meeting; lack of people of color in SAA; and the perception that SAA is dominated by the interests of academic archives.

SAA has become significantly more engaging over time, particularly to younger members. One respondent stated, “SAA has long had a reputation as being an insular organization where a small group dominates. This was not true 30 years ago and is not true now. New members have never had such opportunities for service.”

The current White House administration is seeking to ban travel from a wide array of countries. Traveling to the annual meeting may no longer be feasible for some international members. One respondent stated, "I do not live in the United States, and as of this year I am no longer able to travel safely to the United States. I have travelled to participate in SAA events in the past and taken part in training. This seems no longer possible. It is likely I will not continue my membership. Not your fault."

Addressing Barriers

We believe we have a better understanding of the complex barriers faced by members in participating in the organization. The Committee has compiled the following suggestions for addressing these obstacles, many of which were presented to us by survey respondents.

Expense

Continue to create more opportunities to participate virtually in order to mitigate geographic and financial barriers to participation. This was the most common suggestion from survey respondents.

- Live stream annual meeting sessions, keynote speeches and presidential addresses.
- Encourage committees, sections, and session speakers to livestream their meetings at annual conference. Some sections do this but it is not universal. There are free services such as Hangouts On Air.
- When feasible, provide recorded professional development workshops online for a fee. Recorded webinars in the Digital Archives Specialist courses provide precedent, and SAA already provides MP3 recordings of annual meeting sessions for purchase.

Continue to seek ways to control costs of the annual meeting:

- Shorten the annual meeting.
- Hold multiple short meetings throughout year rather than a single long meeting.
- Consider joint conferences with allied fields of public history, museums, and libraries to increase attendance and potentially lower costs.
- Continue holding meetings in "second tier" cities using the convention center model.

Encourage committees, sections, working groups, etc. to identify and promote opportunities for involvement that do not require attendance at annual meeting.

Consider a sliding scale fee for workshops, courses, etc. in the spirit of tiered membership dues.

Time

Sections and Committees can provide more specific descriptions of leadership positions with estimated time requirements, perhaps in a centralized place on the SAA website.

Experience

In addition to the First Timers and New Members reception at the annual meeting, SAA leaders could host a session for new members on SAA organizational structure and how to make the most of one's membership. This could also be achieved in a video available on SAA's website.

Clarity

Create a “Get Involved” section in the SAA website that clearly articulates the various paths toward involvement in committees, sections, etc., and centralizes information about all leadership positions, both elected and volunteer. Open elected positions and committee appointments could be posted in this centralized location.

Provide more transparent reporting and documentation on participation, including how leadership positions are filled, how many people apply each year, how many people participate in section and committee leadership, how many participate in the mentorship program, etc.

Produce regular profiles of current SAA leaders or volunteers with a description of their path of service that led them to their current positions, perhaps on In the Loop. A respondent commented, “I think I'd have a clearer picture of how to start my own service with SAA if I saw examples of how others have done it.”

Set up an automated ‘thank you’ email sent after a member submits the annual volunteer form. Follow-up emails should encourage members to continue pursuing service opportunities and ways to participate in the annual meeting. These emails would provide an opportunity to more clearly articulate how one can participate in SAA if one isn’t assigned a position, such as participating in the mentoring or navigator programs, or volunteering in the career center.

Other

Attempt to increase visibility of archivists at small institutions, corporate agencies, and government archives in the annual meeting programming, Archival Outlook, and In the Loop.

Initiate a follow-up survey asking members to identify topics and areas that they feel are underrepresented in SAA’s current offerings (section specializations, professional development opportunities, conference session topics) to broaden SAA’s relevance to non-academic archival work environments.

Promote the annual “call for volunteers” sign up form as a way to overcome the perceived cliquish nature of SAA leadership.

Members seeking to draft a statement for SAA endorsement should be reminded of the Criteria for Advocacy Statements adopted in August 2015. Stronger moderation of the Archives and Archivists email list may be necessary when communication becomes too combative.

Where appropriate, SAA leadership should attempt to fill their sections, committees, working groups, task forces, etc. with members from diverse institutions and geographies.