Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
May 31 – June 2, 2009
Chicago, Illinois

Committee on Education
Final Report on Accreditation Project
(Prepared by: Donna McCrea, Amy Cooper Cary, Patricia Galloway,
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BACKGROUND

Responding to a recommendation from 38 SAA members to "appoint a task force to explore the desirability and feasibility of accrediting graduate archival education programs composed of a broad cross-section of the SAA membership, as well as members with particular expertise in graduate archival education," the SAA Council determined at its August 25, 2008, meeting that such an exploration is most appropriately within the purview of an existing appointed group – the Committee on Education, provided that broad comment is sought from the SAA membership, and it adopted the following motion:

> **Motion 13**
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> **THAT the SAA Council direct the Education Committee to explore the desirability and feasibility of developing and implementing an accreditation program in graduate archival education, that the Committee conduct a broad-based survey to obtain member input into the question, and that it provide a preliminary report with recommendations to the Council at its May/June 2009 meeting.**
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> **Support Statement**: Education and training of archivists is central to SAA's mission. At a time when archival education is the primary form of entry into the field and archivist preparation is becoming increasingly diffuse, it is in the best interest of SAA and the archives profession to reexamine the issue of accreditation of graduate archival education programs. Given its charge, the Committee on Education is the appropriate group to conduct this investigation.

DISCUSSION

In August 2008, following the Council's charge, the Committee on Education established a subcommittee made up of Donna McCrea (chair), Katie Salzmann (vice chair), Amy Cooper Cary, Patricia Galloway, and Solveig De Sutter (SAA staff). The subcommittee established the following timeline:

- **September-November:** Inform ourselves about SAA's history with accreditation (when has this issue come up in the past, what was the outcome at those times). Learn about the current landscape of accreditation in general.
- **December-February 20:** Contact a wide variety of stakeholders, including graduate archival educators and signers of the original petition to the Council, to gather feedback on why accreditation was recommended and what underlying issues/concerns accreditation will address.
- **February 20-April:** Work with and compile feedback from stakeholders. Prepare a final report for the Council on the feasibility and desirability of SAA accreditation of graduate archival education programs. If necessary, consult with the Committee on Education to determine what methods or venues would be suitable for gathering additional feedback.
- **May 31:** Submit a final report on accreditation to the Council.

Following the meeting of the full Committee on Education in February, Amber Cushing, the Committee's student intern, and Jeannette Bastian of Simmons College's GSLIS program were added to the subcommittee. In addition to the in-person meeting in February, the subcommittee met several times via conference calls and maintained regular e-mail communication.

To help establish a solid basis for understanding accreditation, as well as the opportunities and challenges involved in such a process, subcommittee members researched SAA's past history with accreditation and contacted a number of key stakeholders directly, including Christine di Bella (primary contact for the original group of petitioners to the Council[1]); Martin Levitt, President of the Academy of Certified Archivists; Deborah Torres, Chair of the Archival Educators Roundtable; Michelle Cloonan, representing the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE); and Nancy Roderer, representing the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T). In addition, De Sutter spoke directly with two teams of consultants who specialize in helping organizations become accrediting bodies.

The subcommittee presented its interim report to the SAA Council in February 2009. Following the February meeting, the accreditation subcommittee posted links to its interim report (and supporting documentation) on the Committee on Education's group webpage at http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/education/. E-mail notification about the interim report and the subcommittee's activities was sent to the SAA Leader's List, the Archives & Archivists listserv, the Archival Educators Roundtable, and the SAA membership via *In the Loop*. Those e-mails and notifications pointed readers to the Education group webpage and strongly encouraged feedback. Contact information was provided for SAA's education office and for Donna McCrea as chair of the Committee on Education. Fewer than fifteen individuals responded, but all comments received were thoughtful and useful.

The Committee on Education's recommendation (below) that SAA not pursue

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[1] See http://saacouncilsubmissions.blogspot.com/ for the initial blog post and petition to the Council.

development and implementation of an accreditation program in graduate archival education is based on the following factors:

1. The cost to SAA for managing an accreditation program would be at least $67,000 per year for additional staff and increased insurance and liability coverage.[2] Estimates from other sources (including a recent white paper by ASIS&T[3]) place the likely cost much higher when fees for legal counsel, memberships in accrediting organizations, and team meetings to summarize site visits are factored in. In addition, individual programs seeking accreditation from SAA would likely need to expend between $10,000 and $25,000 per review cycle for preparing documentation and hosting an accreditation committee site visit.[4]

2. The general environment in education is not conducive to accreditation of programs by SAA. According to a recent ASIS&T report on the landscape of accreditation, the trend in education is toward "flexible mission-based evaluation and school authority" and away from highly regulated standardization and accreditation. "While there is a general understanding of the need for increased accountability in higher education, there seems to be little acknowledgement of or support for the need of accrediting bodies to set strict standards. Additionally, the balance of power between educational institutions and accrediting agencies has consistently shifted towards institutions and away from accreditors."[5] Several educators contacted by the subcommittee indicated that their institutions would be highly unlikely to participate in yet another formal (and expensive) accreditation process. Without the support of a substantial number of deans and directors of archival education programs, SAA could not expect to receive the financial support or critical mass of participation (and thus credibility) necessary to sustain an accreditation program.

3. Despite the 2008 petition to the Council, there appears to be less support among SAA members for a formal, SAA-led accreditation process than originally anticipated. As mentioned earlier, fewer than fifteen individuals responded to the subcommittee's request for feedback through the listservs and the newsletter. Of these respondents, four advocated for accreditation, two were adamantly opposed to accreditation, and several offered suggestions for process improvement.

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[2] This figure was provided by SAA's Director of Finance and was supported by independent accreditation consultants.

[3] ASIS&T White Paper, "Accreditation of Programs for the Education of Information Professionals" (October 20, 2007) available at: http://www.asis.org/white_paper.html.

[4] Subcommittee member Patricia Galloway did an extensive evaluation of costs to her program, including faculty and staff time, for participation in ALA accreditation. Her estimate of $25,000 was supported in conversations with educators at other institutions whose programs are accredited by ALA or regional accrediting bodies.

[5] "Graduate Information Programs and Accreditation: Landscape Survey and Analysis" available at: http://www.asis.org/Accreditation_Report.pdf, p. 35.

4. ASIS&T ultimately found that the challenges involved with designing an accreditation program for a discipline (information studies) that is grounded in a variety of programs, departments, and schools were insurmountable.[6] SAA would face similar issues if it attempted to develop an accreditation process that would apply to archival education in history, library, information, and other programs.

5. Many of the issues driving the request that SAA explore implementation of accreditation for graduate archival education may be addressed in other ways, including several outlined in the "Next Steps" section below.

NEXT STEPS

The Committee on Education will hold an Open Forum at the Joint Annual Meeting in Austin on Wednesday, August 12, from 8:00 to 9:00 pm. At the Forum, the Committee will provide an overview of the work done by the accreditation subcommittee and a summary of the points made in this report to the Council. The Forum has already been announced and has the following description: "SAA's Education Committee was charged to explore options for SAA to become an accrediting body for archival education programs. Here's your chance to learn about the Committee's findings following extensive research both within and outside the archives community, as well as to discuss next steps."

Students and archival educators will be actively recruited as attendees, but everyone will be welcome and encouraged to participate. We hope for a good turnout.

Recurrent themes in the original petition to the Council, and in our verbal and email conversations with individuals about SAA and the accreditation process, include:

• A concern about the proliferation of online programs, some of which may not meet SAA's "Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies" (GPAS).
• A desire for "quality markers," assessment options, and/or clear guidelines and standards that would allow prospective students and prospective employers to compare and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of individual programs.
• A dissatisfaction with SAA's online directory of archival education programs, specifically:
     o A desire to make the directory free; and
     o A desire to be able to use the directory to compare schools by number of courses offered, types of courses offered, number of full-time faculty, graduate employment statistics, and other factors.
• An interest in reconciling the evaluation process for archival education programs with the certification of individuals.
• A desire to see more archival educators involved in ALA-accreditation visiting teams.

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[6] Personal conversation between Donna McCrea and Nancy Roderer, the ASIS&T member most involved with their research into the accreditation process. December 22, 2008.

We expect that these themes will be explored at the Forum.

Anticipated action items for the Committee on Education in the near future, drawn in part or in whole from feedback already received from SAA members, include:

- An update of SAA's GPAS guidelines and the establishment of a regular GPAS review schedule.
- The creation of a checklist for use by students, employers, and other members of the profession that is perhaps based on ACA's General Knowledge Statements.
- The exploration of a "recognition" process similar to the one being considered by ASIS&T.

We expect that additional action items will come from comments and suggestions made at the Open Forum. The Committee on Education will submit a report for the Council's spring 2010 meeting, updating the Council on the efforts of the Committee as we begin to review the GPAS guidelines and incorporate ideas and themes that arise at the Forum.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the SAA Council not pursue development and implementation of an accreditation program in graduate archival education.

Support Statement: The Committee on Education's research on accreditation revealed that to manage such a program is costly; that institutions are unlikely to participate for a variety of reasons; that there appears to be less support for accreditation from the SAA membership than originally anticipated; that designing an accreditation program for a discipline that is grounded in a variety of programs, departments, and schools will likely face insurmountable challenges; and that issues driving the requests for accreditation may be addressed successfully in other ways.