



July 10, 2013

Strategy Division (SP)
Room 4100, Archives II
8601 Adelphi Road
College Park, Maryland 20740-6001

Via email to: strategy@nara.gov

To Whom It May Concern:

I am responding on behalf of the Society of American Archivists to your invitation to comment on NARA's draft strategic plan. Thank you very much for providing this opportunity to us and to the broader community.

Our governing Council has engaged in spirited discussion about the draft, so these comments reflect the combined perspectives of our elected leaders. We too are in the midst of developing a strategic plan and find much in your draft that resonates with our own. We find much to admire in NARA's definition of Strategic Goals for the next five years. It is bold and ambitious in many ways. At the same time, we have several suggestions for possible changes.

We particularly applaud that the Mission, Vision, and first Strategic Goal focus on proactively **enabling effective public access**. "Make access happen" promotes the emphasis across our profession for building better discovery tools and reducing the need for mediated access, thus supporting the Administration's goals for open government. Your clear statement of this as a priority is important for our profession and could serve as inspiration for archival programs throughout our nation. In contrast, the plan only minimally addresses the core emphasis on preservation and collections management that exists in every archives—but we recognize that a Strategic Plan is not intended to focus on "business as usual."

We also enthusiastically applaud the objective to drive use and re-use of NARA records to **create measurable economic activity**. SAA's own Strategic Plan includes a wide array of initiatives under the banner of "Advocacy" that hinge on raising public understanding of the value (writ large) of archives. Enabling re-use to the benefit of our struggling economy would be one worthy way to accomplish this.

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We seek clarification on one item: **the term “high-value” records** as used in the Mission and Vision statements is somewhat opaque. Does this refer to all records that are accessioned into NARA’s collections, or a subset thereof? We think that a clearer term would lead to better understanding of the intent.

Also, one objective in particular raised questions: that of **digitizing “all” analog archival records**. Is this intended to be exceptionally aspirational for reasons such as external fundraising? Or do you consider all records in NARA’s custody to warrant this level of expense without any prior judgment as to their potential for use? Regardless, the extraordinary resources that would be necessary to accomplish this could dwarf the agency’s ability to achieve many other things, both NARA’s core collections management mandate and some of your other laudable objectives.

SAA members face challenges similar to many of those described in NARA’s Strategic Plan, albeit on different scales and in varied institutional contexts. Vexing challenges such as electronic records, big data, and open-access mandates concern us all. As the NARA plan so well articulates, **collaboration is the key** to meeting these challenges. No institution can successfully face such challenges alone; rather, the most viable solutions will be derived from partnerships, including within the community of archives and across boundaries with allied professions in the cultural heritage and information sectors. We are delighted to see so many references to collaborative initiatives strewn throughout the plan. Please be assured that SAA will welcome opportunities to seek active engagement with NARA in areas of mutual concern and need.

The statement of Values articulates qualities that will be essential to NARA’s success in achieving your goals. **Improving employee engagement**, as articulated in the goal “Build our future through our people,” should be a central effort for all organizations in today’s society. Its inclusion in your plan addresses a long-standing need to establish an agency culture in which employees at all levels feel rewarded and capable of moving up a career ladder. We hope that NARA will share its models and strategies for other archives to follow.

Establishing a **leadership program** dovetails perfectly with elements of our own plan. We would, however, appreciate seeing an objective that clearly supports active professional engagement so that NARA employees can both learn from and share expertise with colleagues outside of the federal government.

Building a **diverse workforce** is another objective that you share with SAA and about which we are passionate. You may be aware of our new IMLS-funded Mosaic Program through which we will collaborate with the Association of Research Libraries to provide 15 master’s students in archives or special collections librarianship with financial support, paid internships in libraries and archives, mentoring relationships, leadership development,

and career placement assistance. We would be delighted to explore possibilities for developing a diversity initiative of this sort with NARA.

Finally, we lament the absence of any mention of NHPRC, whose grant programs enable preservation and access for archival holdings held by non-federal institutions. The long record of successful projects significantly extends NARA's reach in "making access happen" to the benefit of the American public. SAA would like to see NARA emphasize the importance of this program.

In closing, permit me to summarize our suggestions for possible changes to your Strategic Plan:

- Consider using a term other than "high-value records" to avoid misunderstanding of the intended meaning.
- Reconsider the objective of digitizing all analog records, which could severely lessen NARA's ability to fulfill its core mandate and to achieve the many other worthy objectives articulated in the draft plan.
- Add an objective encouraging external professional involvement by employees, through which they can both learn from and share expertise with the broader profession.
- Add a statement emphasizing the importance of NHPRC in supporting the national archival community by enabling access by more people to more historical records.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this review. We applaud your desire for broad input and hope that SAA's comments are helpful.

With all best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jackie M. Dooley", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jackie M. Dooley
President, 2012 – 2013