

Introduction

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) requests \$150,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant program to convene archivists from key sectors and professional positionality, and relevant non-archivist stakeholders, to establish a research agenda for the archival profession. A professionally facilitated two-day forum of archival experts, educators, community leaders, and grant makers (referred to hereafter as the Research Agenda Advisory Collective or Collective) will be charged with transforming the recently adopted SAA Research and Innovation Roadmap into a research agenda and framework for its implementation and adoption.¹

While the value of archives among cultural heritage institutions is undisputed, the absence of a coherent and strategic research agenda to focus the innovation of its practitioners is a disadvantage. In 2019, SAA Council charged the Committee on Research, Data and Assessment (CORDA) to establish a research agenda; Council adopted the Research and Innovation “Roadmap” in August 2023. The Roadmap’s seven themes, 31 topics, and 64 areas for future research comprise a strong foundation for prioritization. In its current state the Roadmap represents the combined thinking of CORDA and many other SAA members, gathered over several years, which comprehensively identifies the research needs of the archives profession. It is exhaustive, but it is not strategic. To achieve strategic impact over the next several years, we must distill from the Roadmap a small, focused agenda of research that can best achieve the profession’s informational needs to address advocacy efforts, professional practice and performance, and, especially, effective user service. This prioritization process must be undertaken by archivists from academic, government, private and public organizations—not by an SAA committee—if it is to be endorsed and adopted by SAA membership and professionals more broadly, pushing archival practice in critical areas. It must also involve key external stakeholders with their own critical perspectives. This complex work of distillation will be onerous. It will require expert facilitation and the sort of frank, direct, and focused engagement that can best take place in a face-to-face convening encompassing multiple sessions over a couple days. Encouraging innovative archival practice and shaping the professional development of the archival workforce is directly aligned with the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant Program’s Goal 3, Objective 3. Funding from IMLS would enable SAA to create and steward a research agenda making clear where archivists must direct their professional training and attention.

Justification

The articulated need for a unified research agenda for the archival profession can be traced to the 1980s. As Dowler explained in 1988, due to the lack of common ground and collective shared standardized data, “...a research agenda for archives, is only a pipedream.”² More than 40 years later, archivists throughout North America are actively engaged in research, assessment, and evaluation related to the archival profession. A multitude of independent and SAA component group-based

¹ SAA Research and Innovation Roadmap:

<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/committee-on-research-data-and-assessment/saa-council-approves-adoption-of-research-and-innov>. See full Roadmap in the Supplemental Materials section of this grant proposal.

² Dowler, Lawrence. “The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles: A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use of Records.” *The American Archivist* 51, no. 1/2 (1988): 74–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293198>.

research activities are conducted every year and those research results and data subsequently appear in just as many venues and outlets, like the SAA Dataverse, a repository that supports the reuse of data sets for purposes of fostering research, knowledge, insights, and a deeper understanding of archival organizations, the status of archivists, and the impact of archives and archival work on broader society.³ However, such research projects have rarely been coordinated or driven by any shared strategic vision and thus fail to move the profession decisively forward.

In 2017 OCLC published a “Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries”, providing a, “map with many potential routes by which to get to the desired future.”⁴ This agenda has spurred more focused research including OCLC’s “Summary of Research: Findings from the Building a National Archival Finding Aid Network Project” published in May 2023 by Chela Weber, pointing to significant gaps between archival practice and user satisfaction.⁵ Studies like A*CENSUS II point to significant disaffection between archival workers, repositories, and library leaders.⁶ These studies and efforts suggest that a prioritized research agenda will drive the profession forward in more meaningful and impactful ways. A map with *many potential routes* is too broad and offers too many potential directions and pathways to spur decisive and transformational progress in key and critical areas. Professional associations that act strategically often promulgate focused research agendas to spur their members to address knowledge and performance gaps. SAA began such a project by developing a Research and Innovation Roadmap from 2019-2023.⁷ While the Roadmap comprehensively addresses research opportunities, it does not prioritize them. A facilitated convening of the Research Agenda Advisory Collective can turn the Roadmap into a strategic and user-focused set of research priorities that would guide SAA and other related associations, as well as academic and professional research pursuits in the archival community, for the next several years. SAA anticipates that a research agenda advanced through this IMLS-funded forum will be a decisive and watershed moment for the profession, turning a pipe dream into reality. As is true with the Research and Innovation Roadmap, the agenda will be aligned with SAA’s strategic plan and its fundamental goals—advocating for archives and archivists, enhancing professional growth, advancing the field, and meeting members’ needs—require focused research. A research agenda can help drive SAA strategically forward.⁸ Effective professional associations frequently shine a light on areas of research that confront their strategic needs, and then encourage their members to address them. With the Roadmap in place, SAA is finally able to do the same—to develop and then promote a focused and practical agenda for archival research in line with its strategic objectives. Such an agenda can drive forward the association’s strategic plans and DEIA initiatives, and can improve user services and other areas of archivists’ performance.

³ <https://www2.archivists.org/saa-dataverse>

⁴ Weber, Chela Scott. 2017. *Research and Learning Agenda for Archives, Special, and Distinctive Collections in Research Libraries*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. P. 7 <https://doi.org/10.25333/C3C34F>.

⁵ Weber, Chela Scott, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Brooke Doyle, Lesley A. Langa, Merrilee Proffitt, Bruce Washburn, Itza A. Carbajal. 2023. Summary of Research: Findings from the Building a National Finding Aid Network Project. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/7a4c-0r03>.

⁶ <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/acensus-ii-all-archivists-survey-report/>

⁷ CODA was charged by SAA Council in 2019 with “Engaging academic and other communities within SAA to perform research by helping to set research agendas.” After four years of iterative work the current version of the Roadmap was approved by Council in 2023.

⁸ <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/strategic-plan/2023-2025>

Allied professional associations are already engaged in this sort of effort. The American Library Association has its Office for Research and Statistics, whose mission is to “provide leadership and expert advice to ALA staff, members and public on all matters related to research and statistics about libraries, librarians and other library staff.”⁹ OCLC has a research arm that is committed to research-driven advancement of libraries and archives, whose research agenda is structured around topics that empower libraries to advance strategically in a technologically driven world.¹⁰ Similarly, the Alliance of American Museums has its central Research Program, which “provide[s] sound and current data to support the Alliance, its members and the museum field.” Grant makers do this as well, as is evident in a recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts, and IMLS’s Research & Evaluation arm.¹¹ They both conduct and commission original research about America’s libraries and museums, collect and synthesize benchmarking data, monitor external research, and collaborate with other organizations on research projects of interest to their members and their professions.¹² By creating standing research arms within their operating structures, these associations have positioned themselves to commission, gather, and evaluate information critical for their members in serving their audiences better, demonstrating their value to society, and expanding their professional knowledge base.

In creating its Committee on Research, Data, and Analysis (CORDA), SAA took the crucial first step in this direction.¹³ CORDA is a compact standing committee (currently 14-strong) who are committed to providing SAA members with standardized tools for gathering and analyzing data; managing a repository for data and other research outputs (SAA Dataverse); developing and offering training on gathering, analyzing, interpreting, and using data; and supplying up-to-date and reliable basic facts and figures about archives and archivists.¹⁴ The group also organizes and presents SAA’s annual Research Forum, a long-running annual conference program that highlights and promotes ongoing research efforts by SAA members and other archivists.¹⁵ CORDA’s rotating membership is dedicated to growing a community of archivists that is ever more informed by, and conversant with, practical data that can move the profession forward.

Then, in supporting the development of its Research and Innovation Roadmap, SAA took the next critical step of organizing and highlighting the areas of research necessary to provide practical data to advance the profession. In requesting an IMLS grant, we seek to launch the remaining key piece—a prioritized research agenda to guide archivists for the coming years. This prioritized agenda is too important to too many stakeholders to consider developing it within CORDA alone, or even within SAA or the larger archival community. This agenda must be the collaborative work of stakeholders representing diverse perspectives in the archival endeavor.

⁹ For further information, see its landing page on the ALA website: <https://www.ala.org/ala/ors/researchstatistics.htm> (accessed on February 11, 2023).

¹⁰ <https://www.oclc.org/research/publications/2017/oclcresearch-research-and-learning-agenda.html>

¹¹ <https://rmcresearchcorporation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Yes-Art-Works-Now-What.pdf>,
<https://www.ims.gov/research-evaluation>

¹² For further information, see its landing page on the AAM website at: <http://www.aam-us.org/about-museums/research> (accessed on February 11, 2023).

¹³ <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/committee-on-research-data-and-assessment>

¹⁴ <https://www2.archivists.org/facts-and-figures>

¹⁵ <https://www2.archivists.org/publications/research-forum>

The immediate target group for this project comprises the diverse stakeholder groups who will be participating in the convening. These will include archivists from various constituencies and identity groups; librarians and museum professionals; and representatives of grant making agencies (see Project Plan for selection criteria). These important stakeholders will reduce the comprehensive Research and Innovation Roadmap down to a small set of priority research areas that can guide and direct archivists and archives students so that they produce research findings and data that will advance the profession in serving all its users more effectively, as well as in growing the population of archivers users. But it is the many users of archives, in this generation and generations to come, that are the beneficiaries of this work.

Work of this magnitude, if it is to be performed effectively and comprehensively, if it is to equitably represent the voices of all stakeholders, needs to take place in a carefully planned convening over a multi-day period. We believe that such a convening must take place in person and be led by skilled facilitators. In arriving at this conclusion, we considered the alternatives of a virtual convening or some hybrid format, but found such approaches inadequate. We envision that the convening will demand a combination of all-attendee work, as well as numerous breakout sessions. This dynamic and organic structure can be very hard to facilitate in a virtual setting, but is ideally suited to an in-person structure in which all participants can truly engage each other's attention over an extended period. Many studies support the notion that in-person convenings are especially important when the questions to be navigated are very complex and when participants need to establish emotional and social rapport. A 2023 academic study reported in *Scientific American* observed that “we now have a wealth of information’ demonstrating that video and real-life interactions are meaningfully different for human brains,” where in-person interactions show more activity in the brain, illustrating that the...“context of live social interactions matters perhaps more than we thought.”¹⁶ We also anticipate useful informal conversations and chance discussions over shared meals will support this complicated process. For example, the development of complicated standards like *Encoded Archival Description and Describing Archives: A Content Standard* have depended in no small part on the “energy in the room” in order to achieve successful outcomes. A convening of forty-some active participants will require such energy and will be much more successful because of it. When the fundamental principles underlying the DACS standard were reimaged in 2017, the demanding process that produced a successful outcome involved the in-person engagement of a dozen archivists and information professionals working together at a Yale guest house over a long weekend. That level of engagement and energy was to a large degree made possible by the face-to-face convening.

Project Work Plan

The project will be completed in three stages: (1) Planning and Selection, (2) Execution, and (3) Synthesis and Deliverables.

Stage 1: Planning and Selection (August 2024 - February 2025)

During the first seven months of the project, from August 2024 to February 2025, the CORDA-core project team, in collaboration with SAA leadership, will lay the foundation for the project. Efforts

¹⁶ Article available at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/its-not-all-in-your-head-you-do-focus-differently-on-zoom/>. Accessed March 15, 2024.

during the first four months will focus on selecting and hiring a facilitator, working with facilitators to develop an application process and weighted rubric for participant selection criteria to ensure an inclusive and diverse group, establishing a communication plan to launch the application and call for participants, and determining the dates for the two-day in-person forum.

The CORDA-core project team in preparation for the final proposal have spoken with several consulting firms. RMC Research Corporation¹⁷ is our top contender for this project as they worked with the National Endowment for the Arts on a similar project where they turned a complex strategic plan into a Research Agenda, engaging a diverse group of 46 participants in 7 focus groups.¹⁸ RMC works across education, healthcare and arts industries, whose clients include local, state, and federal agencies; philanthropic foundations; creative services organizations and other nonprofits; higher education institutions; and private businesses. Their research profile, track record of conducting research and program based evaluation, and capacity building across industries, many of which deliver public benefit, is well aligned with the focus and intent of this effort. They are committed to executing the project within our budget of \$30,000 and are available during our timeline, see supporting documents for budget breakdown.

Once a facilitator is selected, they will review the Research and Innovation Roadmap and solicit related materials to establish context and familiarity with the current domain of archival research. Next facilitators will meet with the CORDA-core project team and SAA leadership to establish an understanding of the Research Agenda's purpose and goals. Collectively the group will develop an application process and weighted rubric for participant selection criteria. A weighted rubric, aligned with the Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion¹⁹, will guide the selection criteria for appointments, including:

- **In and outside of the profession.** Practicing archivists will form the majority of the Collective, including archivists affiliated with allied professions including the American Library Association (ALA), COSA, Regional Professional Associations, foundations and funders, as well as international organizations including either IFLA or UNESCO, grant makers, and educators.
- **Geographic location.** Participants will primarily represent the United States of America, (West, Midwest, Northeast, South). We will also allocate space and budgetary funds for one international participant (e.g. IFLA, UNESCO).
- **Socio-cultural factors.** The Collective will represent different race/ethnicities and gender, related to individual and community identity, including the attributes mentioned in SAA's Equal Opportunity/Non-discrimination Policy.²⁰
- **Employment seniority, status, and level.**²¹ We seek to include archivists that are individual contributors/lone arrangers, managers, and senior administrators/executives in the profession. Archivists that are both contract/limited term vs. permanent. Archivists that are entry level (0-5 years), mid-level (6-14 years), and senior (15+ years) in their respective careers.

¹⁷ <https://rmcresearchcorporation.com/>

¹⁸ <https://rmcresearchcorporation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Yes-Art-Works-Now-What.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-statement-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion>

²⁰ https://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/appendices/app_a/EONDP

²¹ Classification based on the A*Census II survey and findings, see:

<https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/acensus-ii-all-archivists-survey-report/>

- **Archives sector.** An equal distribution of participants representing all sectors of the field including: Academic, Government Agency, Non-profit, For-profit, Self-employed, and Community Archives.

Once the rubric is developed it will be brought before the SAA Council for feedback. By the end of November 2024, the call for applications for the Research Agenda Advisory Collective will go out. Potential participants will have two months to apply and express their interest. To cast a wide net, the project team will work to develop a list of relevant listservs to advertise the opportunity to participate as well as utilize SAA's social media platforms, professional websites (SAA landing page, ACA, and ICA), and newsletters like *Archival Outlook* and *In the Loop*.

In December 2024, the CORDA-core team, facilitators, and SAA leadership will review submissions and select 35 individuals based on the weighted rubric; this will allow two months' time in case additional participants need to be identified and invited. Individuals who exhibit interest by applying, but are ultimately not selected, will provide the project-team with a pool of professionals who are interested and invested in the project. The facilitators may choose to incorporate these individuals in pre- or post-forum work. By the close of stage one, SAA leadership will book a venue in Chicago and line up appropriate catering.

Stage 2: Execution (January 2025 - May 2025)

Once the 35-member Research Agenda Advisory Collective is formed, the work to transform the recently adopted SAA Research and Innovation Roadmap into a research agenda will commence as early as January 2025. Four months of pre-work has been allocated to maximize the efficacy of the two-day in-person forum, which will take place in May 2025, before the annual Society of American Archivists meeting in August 2025. Pre-work may include convening virtual focus groups centered on the Roadmap's seven themes, 31 topics, and 64 areas to begin the prioritization process, or sending the Roadmap out to participants for comment and iterative refinement in several stages to begin the distillation process or to identify what is missing. Whatever methodology is chosen, we will ensure that data is captured, anonymized, and deposited in the SAA Dataverse—providing insight in our process, replicability, and informing how we structure the two-day in person forum.

The two-day in person forum will take place in May in Chicago, where SAA is headquartered and a relatively easy location to travel to in the center of the country. Prior to our Chicago convening, we will share the preliminary results of the pre-work with the Collective to inform the conversations and maximize the use of our time. In consultation with the facilitators, the CORDA-core team and the data gathered from Stage One of the project, we will collaboratively design a structured process to engage participants and ensure results. The goal of this convening is to leverage the experience and expertise of the Collective, concluding with a draft research agenda that is designed to respond to current and emerging needs of archival practitioners and the broader archival community in the US, and agreed upon life-span. Given the size of the group, we may decide to record conversations with consent of participants to summarize key themes and discussion points. Alternatively, we may have representatives from the CORDA-core team act as designated note takers to capture discussions.

Stage 3: Synthesis and Deliverables (May 2025 - January 2026)

Holding the two-day in-person forum in May 2025 *before* the annual meeting will allow us to use the largest annual gathering of our profession to get feedback in order to further develop and refine what we accomplished at the forum in Chicago. Feedback at the annual meeting could be workshopped at an invitational working meeting with a small group of SAA leaders and/or solicited from the broader community by posting the draft agenda online, via professional email lists, and social media for comment. Community feedback will be considered and incorporated into progressive drafts of the Agenda.

All pre-work, work during the in-person facilitation, and post-forum work will be meticulously recorded by the facilitators and CORDA-core team so that data collection can be replicable and communicated with the larger archival community during stage three of the project. We can approach our data analysis through the lens of constructivist grounded theory, in which we collaborate with the participants to co-construct meaning from their experiences and ideas.²² We would capture key themes and priorities on flip charts and/or virtually, using tools such as Jamboard or Padlet (this would also allow for additional participant reflections post-convening). The intent is to be as specific as possible when identifying research topics and research questions along with high leverage problems and applications of research. We will bring forth comments about potential methodologies and data sources along with the opportunities and challenges explicitly addressed by participants. Using this thematic content analysis, we can shape priorities and a draft research agenda for the archival profession.

To be transparent about the process, the project team will deposit all data collected into the SAA Dataverse and publish a white paper on the SAA website²³, as well as submit it to the editors of the *American Archivist*, the premier journal of our profession, to communicate how the Roadmap was transformed into an Agenda. The white paper will also include recommendations for similar future projects as well as future iterations of what re-framing the research agenda would look like. A framework for agenda maintenance, its strategic implementation, and an outreach plan for dissemination, adoption, and awareness will be created and published on SAA's website, by January 2026.

Diversity Plan

The Society of American Archivists centers its values on diversity and equity, and is committed to building a culture of inclusion. As an association that serves archives and archivists across the profession, SAA benefits from the participation of people from all backgrounds. The Research Agenda's development will be established in alignment with the Society's *Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*.²⁴ From its inception, the Roadmap was developed using inclusive practices in alignment with SAA 2020-2022 strategic plan²⁵ and the 2020-2021 DEIA plan.²⁶ Its seven themes reflect priorities established in the 2020-2021 DEIA plan, and are mapped to relevant DEIA goals.

²² Charmaz, Kathy. "Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods." In *Business and Management Research Methodologies*, V1-. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006.

²³ <https://www2.archivists.org/>

²⁴ <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-statement-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion>

²⁵ <https://www2.archivists.org/governance/strategic-plan>

²⁶ SAA's Work Plan on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility:
<https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/0723-III-C-WorkPlanDEIA.pdf>

The themes emerged from facilitated discussions with CORDA, SAA Section and Committee Chairs, and open membership feedback collected at Society of American Archivists annual meetings (2018 & 2023).

To include a diversity of perspectives and practices in the transformation of the Roadmap into a Research Agenda, the process of appointment to the Research Agenda Advisory Collective will be open for self nominations, solicited through an application process. Appointments will be made based on a weighted rubric, outlined in the above Project Plan section of this proposal. Selecting applicants based on a weighted rubric (published as part of the application process for transparency), grounded in SAA's commitment to DEIA, will ensure the Research Agenda reflects and serves not just the archival community and its users, but society as a whole. Further refinement to the selection process will be discussed with the facilitator, to include additional insights that strengthen the diversity plan, which will be integral to the success of the project, as the participants will be an active part of the transformation process from its inception to its completion and future recommendations/planning. Research guided by a thoughtful and inclusive Agenda will inform archivists who wield significant power over who society documents, as well as establish policies governing access to these valuable primary source materials.

Further ensuring inclusivity, IMLS funds will enable all Research Agenda Advisory Collective members to receive full funding to attend the two-day forum, alleviating any financial barriers to participation. In addition, SAA has offered discounted or gratis membership, worth several hundred dollars, to enable participants to attend. Society of American Archivists Code of Conduct²⁷ will also provide a foundation for all in-person and virtual interactions for this project to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for participants.

Project Results

The value of archives among cultural heritage institutions is undisputed. However, the absence of a coherent and strategic research agenda to focus archival innovation and practice is a disadvantage. IMLS funding would enable a thoughtful and inclusive transformation of the Research and Innovation Roadmap into a prioritized and published Research Agenda for the archival profession. By creating and disseminating a Research Agenda, SAA could position themselves to commission, gather, fund and evaluate information critical for their members to serve their audiences better, demonstrate their value to society, and expand their professional knowledge base. Beyond informing the work of archivists, the agenda can work to inform grant funders or corporations with philanthropic arms, as well as leaders of large national standard-setting organizations. Equally as important as the transformation of the roadmap into an agenda is *how* the agenda will be used. Working closely with the facilitators, the CORDA-core team and SAA leadership, funding will allow us to deliver the following:

Prioritized and published Research Agenda for the archival profession

The three stages of this project—planning and selection, execution, and synthesis—will culminate with a Research Agenda for archival profession, based on the Research and Innovation Roadmap. The Research Agenda will be a direct result of the Research Agenda Advisory Collective

²⁷ <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-code-of-conduct>

feedback/pre-work, 2 day in-person forum, sharing of work/process for comment with the larger SAA community during the Annual Meeting, and final synthesis of the Agenda.

Communication/Outreach Dissemination Plan

Once the Agenda is finalized, a communication and outreach plan will be established to create an awareness of priorities in and outside of the archival community, to disseminate the agenda, and to encourage its adoption and rapid uptake. To document the process of agenda creation for transparency and replicability, a white paper will be published on the SAA website and submitted to the *American Archivist* for publication. The data²⁸ collected from the facilitated discussions and findings will be deposited into the SAA Dataverse for public online access and reuse. The CORDA-core team will work closely with SAA to integrate the Agenda into its programming (annual meeting and/or research forum²⁹) and research funding opportunities with its Foundation.³⁰ Finally our communication plan will focus on getting by-in from grant funders/corporations with philanthropic arms/leaders of large national standard-setting organizations.

Framework for agenda maintenance and recommendations for future work

Once the Agenda is established, the CORDA-core team and SAA leadership in consultation with the facilitators will decide on its lifespan and when the Agenda will be re-evaluated, including recommendations for future work. SAA is committed to stewarding this important document, using it as a framework for important conversations with allied professional organizations to facilitate collaboration and push the profession forward.

All deliverables will result in an archival profession that performs better in key respects, especially in service to its user communities, an archival workforce that is working in a coherent fashion integrating the agenda and needs into all aspects of professional practice and self-directed learning opportunities, and funding opportunities that eliminates barriers to critical research that ultimately benefits society as a whole.

²⁸ The data will be de-identified.

²⁹ <https://www2.archivists.org/publications/research-forum>

³⁰ Currently, the SAA Foundation Board awards grants that meet the [mission and goals](#) of the Foundation and/or the [strategic planning](#) priorities of the Society of American Archivists.