



SOCIETY OF
**American
Archivists**

Section Health Assessment Overview (2023)

By SAA Council Members: Joyce
Gabiola, Jasmine Jones,
Dominique Luster, and Lydia Tang

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Executive Summary

Background

In the spring of 2023, the Section Health Assessment Working Group (Council Members: Joyce Gabiola, Jasmine Jones, Dominique Luster, and Lydia Tang) launched a member-wide survey to better understand the ways in which members engage with sections and to gather ideas about other models of communities of practice. This survey is a component of a multi-year initiative to assess sections' health and their effectiveness in meeting member needs. The survey was open from April 3 – April 30, 2023 and collected 449 total responses. This document provides an overview of the survey results. More information, including question rationales, selected comments from respondents, and fuller response data, is available in the [Society of American Archivists Section Health Assessment Summary Report](#).

Overarching Themes

Sections are essential for SAA membership. They are forums for information-sharing and community focusing upon specific areas of the archival profession. With such a broad umbrella organization of SAA, sections help members feel more connected and less overwhelmed.

There are pain points with our current section model:

1. Supporting 47 sections is a formidable administrative burden for SAA staff, who must coordinate elections, annual reports, and ongoing infrastructural support.
2. Many sections struggle with sustaining leadership and capacity to support members. It can be difficult to find enough people to stand for section elections. Additionally, not having dedicated funds to support section initiatives (such as honoraria for speakers) makes accomplishing programming and initiatives more challenging.
3. Overwhelmingly, respondents are exasperated with the common practice of excessive cross-posting on section email lists.

Through this survey, the Section Health Assessment Working Group explored possible pathways for success, such as consolidation and/or transitioning certain groups to discussion groups. However, we learned that we should have had an “undecided” option for these questions, as the comments we received surfaced reservations that were more complex than a simple “yes” or “no” answer.

Overall, 75% or so of respondents indicated that they were receptive to the idea of consolidating sections. They recognized that consolidating leadership would help with capacity but also firmly indicated that the primary value of sections was their niche areas of coverage. If Council consolidated some sections, there were concerns about whether some of these unique areas would have the same level of leadership and initiative for programming throughout the year and thus provide the same level of professional relevancy for membership.

86% of respondents indicated they would be receptive to transitioning less active sections into discussion groups. However, respondents raised questions about the process and qualifiers that would prompt this transition and how a discussion group could transition back if its membership ever desired to do so.

Respondents indicated that part of the complexity of this discussion has to do with the decision in 2017 to transition round tables to sections. While it equalized the component groups, it also brought greater expectations of output and performance than what round table members originally anticipated.

Additionally, SAA Connect, the messaging platform used by SAA, factors into the discussion as well. There is a widespread dislike of this platform, which preserves postings indefinitely, has delayed message delivery (for the 1-day digest, for example), and has the effect of siloing conversations, which may encourage the excessive cross-posting of messages. There was some nostalgia expressed for “That Darn List,” which, for all the issues that arose with it, was also a more flexible and immediate communication tool. Comments also pointed to the Facebook group “Archivists Think Tank,” the archival processing Slack channel, and X (formerly Twitter) as organic self-organizing communities for support and information-sharing.

Since issuing and internally reviewing the results of the survey, the Section Health Assessment Working Group presented verbal updates at every Council meeting and led Council liaisons through a series of activities. From May through June 2023, Council liaisons completed preliminary section assessments based on compliance with the SAA governance requirements, which look at the section’s activities, annual reports, and compliance with the governance manual. Council Liaisons reached out to section leadership if a section was not in compliance with governance requirements to discuss potential next steps for the section.

Although Council liaisons reviewed governance requirements to inform their assessment of sections, other factors emerged in discussions with section leadership that are pertinent to a section’s health and its potential next steps. A noteworthy observation during this assessment process was the need for Council liaisons to be more actively engaged in bi-directional communication with section leaders, to proactively offer additional support as soon as a section indicates that they are struggling as opposed to earmarking them in non-compliance with governance after the fact.

The Working Group also acknowledged and communicated with the Council from the start that this assessment process needed to factor in grace for section leadership, who all have been navigating the pandemic for the past several years, which has impacted everyone’s capacity for leadership and volunteering.

As described in the Council agenda item for July 2023, Council voted on transitioning the following sections:

- Archival Educators Section (Former Liaison: Derek Mosley; Current Liaison: Michelle Ganz) – Recommendation: Transition to a discussion group
- Latin American and Caribbean Cultural Heritage Archives Section (Former Liaison: Derek Mosley; Current Liaison: Selena Ortega-Chiolero) – Recommendation: Discontinue
- Government Records Section (Liaison: Krystal Appiah) and Local Government Records Section (Liaison: Jasmine Jones) – Recommendation: Merge
- Women’s Collections Section (Liaison: Krystal Appiah) – Recommendation: The Women’s Collections Section was initially recommended by the liaison and voted on by Council to merge. Upon further discussion with the Council liaison, it was decided that the Section would transition to a discussion group.
- Military Archives Section (Former Liaison: Rachel Winston; Current Liaison: Selena Ortega-Chiolero) – Recommendation: Military Archives was initially recommended by the liaison and voted on Council to transition to a discussion group. Based on further investigation to clarify a discrepancy, this decision has been overturned and this section will not transition.
- Women Archivists Section (Former Liaison: Rachel Winston; Current Liaison: Michelle Ganz) – Recommendation: The Women Archivists Section was initially identified as a possible group to merge with the Women’s Collections Section. However, since the Women’s Collections Section will be transitioning to a discussion group, Council determined that the Women Archivists Section would not transition at this time.
- Human Rights Archives Section (Former Liaison: Stephen Curley; Current Liaison: Conor Casey) – Recommendation: Transition to a discussion group
- Security Section (Former Liaison: Stephen Curley; Current Liaison: Conor Casey) – Recommendation: Merge

A longer-term goal will be to continue to look at how SAA can more flexibly foster communities of practice, normalizing the process of creating, sustaining, and sunseting communities more organically. Eighty survey respondents volunteered to participate in focus groups, and we will look forward to engaging their expertise and insight to chart the path forward, if needed. We need to ask ourselves, *how can we meet the community and information needs of our colleagues?* The answer might be with different technology and eventually might mean a different model completely for communities of practice, but it’s clear that SAA needs to proactively lead, or it will be left behind.

SAA Council will be working with section leadership to learn more about concerns and areas to support long-term health and sustainability of current sections over the coming months. This is a follow-up to the first-phase assessment of sections and their meeting of governance requirements. Council liaisons will be working with their assigned sections for which a decision to transition was made. This will happen over the course of this next fiscal year. The Section Health Assessment Working Group will submit a report to Council, based on information they've received, with recommendations of next steps.

You may direct any questions or comments related to this report to SAACouncil@archivists.org.
In the subject line, please use: Section Health Assessment Overview 2023.

Individual Questions

Are you a member of the Society of American Archivists?

- 92.7% of respondents indicated they are SAA members, 5.8% indicated that they were former members and 1.6% indicated that they were never SAA members.

If you are NOT currently a member of SAA, why?

- Of the 34 responses, most (n=18) referenced the price of membership being too high to afford.

How many sections are you affiliated with?

- 66.4% indicated that they were affiliated with 1-5 sections. 20% indicated that they were affiliated with 6-10 sections. 6.7% indicated that they were affiliated with 10 or more sections and 6.9% indicated that they were not affiliated with any sections.

What do you LIKE about section membership?

- Listserv discussion: 68.8%
- Programming: 61.5%
- Resources: 57.2%
- Professional: development 56.3%
- Social connection: 36.1%

What do you DISLIKE about section membership?

- Excessive cross-posting of messages 53%
- No time to participate 30.3%
- I don't like the hierarchy/bureaucracy of elections and steering committees 17.8%
- I get too many emails 16.3%
- Not applicable - I love all aspects of Sections 12.2%
- Sections' scopes are not applicable to me 7.3%
- Section programming isn't useful to me 6.5%

How do you engage with sections?

- Read posts on section listserv 84.9%
- Attend meetings or presentations organized by section leadership 69.9%
- Post on the section listserv 34.7%
- Stand for election and/or serve on section leadership 34.3%

- Volunteer with projects or other section initiatives (as a section leader or not) 24.7%
- Not applicable - I am not a member of any sections 5.3%
- Nothing - I do not engage with sections 4.2%

Select the sections that you feel are doing great work!

- Lone Arrangers 26.3%
- Accessibility & Disability Section 24.3%
- College & University Archives 23.6%
- Students and New Professionals 22%
- Description Section 20%
- Archivists of Religious Collections Section 18.7%
- Electronic Records Section 17.8%
- Reference, Access, and Outreach Section 17.8%
- Business Archives Section 15.4%
- Accessioning, Acquisition and Appraisal Section 14.7%
- Native American Archives Section 13.8%
- Archives and Archivists of Color Section 13.8%
- Issues and Advocacy Section 13.6%
- Collection Management Section 13.1%
- Preservation Section 11.6%
- Records Management Section 11.4%
- Encoded Archival Standards Section 10.9%
- Metadata and Digital Objects Section 10.2%
- Visual Materials Section 10.2%
- Women Archivists Section 9.4%
- Web Archiving Section 9.4%
- Archives Management Section 9.1%
- Manuscript Repositories Section 8.7%
- Museum Archives Section 8%
- Diverse Sexuality and Gender Section 7.6%
- Archival History Section 7.3%
- Oral History Section 6.5%
- Design Records Section 6.2%
- Government Records Section 5.8%
- Audio and Moving Image Archives Section 5.1%
- Congressional Papers Section 4.7%
- Women’s Collections Section 4.5%

- Archival Educators Section 4.5%
- Public Library Archives Section 4%
- International Archival Affairs Section 3.8%
- Local Government Records Section 3.8%
- Independent Archivists Section 3.3%
- Science Technology and Health Care Section 3.3%
- Human Rights Archives Section 2.9%
- Military Archives Section 2.9%
- Latin American and Caribbean Heritage Archives Section 2.9%
- Performing Arts Section 2%

Caveat summarized by a respondent: “I’m worried the data will just tell you which sections are the most well-known, not necessarily who’s doing the ‘best’ work.”

I use SAA Connect for:

- 62.1% opt for a 1-day digest
- 26.9% indicated NA - I don’t know what SAA Connect is / I don’t use it
- 7.1% opt for immediate messaging

There were multiple comments expressing dislike of Connect.

With SAA Connect, I feel that I receive:

- 49.2% Just enough emails
- 24.7% Not applicable, I don’t use it
- 24.3% I get too many emails
- 1.8% Too few emails

How would you feel about consolidating sections based upon overarching themes with subcommittees for more specific topics/interests?

- 76.3% indicated that they would like it.
- 23.7% indicated that they would not like it.

What would you like or not like about this approach?

- Respondents in favor of consolidation generally noted overlap and overwhelm with the number of sections, and a general sense of fatigue with email cross-posting. Respondents against consolidation generally noted an appreciation for the specific areas the sections focus on, and feared that consolidation would make specific sections less relevant to their work. Respondents also offered

additional considerations for the future of sections, which Council looks forward to exploring further in the focus groups mentioned in the Executive Summary section of this document.

How do you feel about transitioning minimally active or dormant sections to a discussion group? A discussion group is an SAA Connect Community like the Professional Writing Virtual Group, which would not be required to hold elections, have a steering committee, or do programming.

- 86% indicated that they like it.
- 14% indicated that they don't like it

What would you like or not like about this approach?

- Respondents shared their thoughts on the balance between flexibility and structure in sections versus discussion groups. Respondents also noted the importance of strong leadership to section success and highlighted the role section leadership serves in providing professional leadership and engagement opportunities. Respondents also indicated that SAA should look into why sections become inactive, and whether we can develop a structure that balances capacity and flexibility.

If you like the idea of some sections transitioning to a discussion group, which ones do you recommend for this change and why?

- The responses to this question ranged from holding back, feeling not qualified or unwilling to comment on sections that they don't participate in to widespread listing of sections. Some respondents, however, did identify particular sections. Other comments included suggestions to transition all sections to discussion groups and allow discussion groups a process to apply for section status; that sections should decide themselves on how they should be administered; and that inactive sections transitioned to discussion groups may only then become inactive discussion groups, thus not addressing the root of the issue.

Are there other models/ideas that we should consider to effectively support "communities of practice"?

- Some respondents pointed out the need for sections to change due to the shift into a largely digital environment. Other respondents presented an overall concern of either increasing or maintaining the current level of bureaucracy concerning sections, while others suggested a more casual or less formal structure to eliminate barriers to participation. Some respondents acknowledged

that any section groups that transition into a discussion group can still host programming (without having to commit to governance requirements).