

Why Archival Certification?: Professional Development, Continuing Education, and Credibility

SUSAN HAMBURGER, PH.D.

Introduction

The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) was established in 1989, and participates in the definition and advancement of international professional archival goals, ethics, and standards. Since 1989, more than 1,300 archivists have been certified by meeting standards of experience and education, and by passing the certification exam. In 2013 the author presented research findings and subsequently published an article on the correlation between archival certification and employment. Archival certification continues to be a topic of interest. As a follow-up to the author's research and publication about the correlation between archival certification and employment in which respondents almost unanimously reported that certification did not help them obtain employment other than in corporate archives, the current research project surveyed certified archivists to determine what they perceived to be the benefits of archival certification when it is not a requirement for employment. In an online survey disseminated between July 14 and August 18, 2014, the author sought responses from certified archivists to ascertain why they got certified and recertified. Based on responses to an open-ended question in the author's previous survey that touched on credentials and professional development, the author developed the 2014 survey to delve more deeply into the motivation to pay for a credential that employers do not require or reward. This research report is an expansion of the author's presentation at the 2016 SAA Research Forum.

Problem Statement

While the Academy of Certified Archivists promotes archival certification, having the credential brings little reward in terms of hiring preference, recognition, or salary increase. The question is why archivists become certified when there is no financial gain. To understand why archivists pay to obtain the credential and get recertified for an additional fee, the author disseminated a survey to get answers from a self-selected sample of certified archivists.

Literature Review

The arguments for and against archival certification were discussed in the author's article, "Archival Certification – Necessity or Nicety?"¹ In the intervening years since that literature review in 2012, no other articles have been published dealing with archival certification.

Methodology

The author determined that the best way to find out why archivists obtained certification was to ask their opinions in an anonymous online survey. Opinion surveys, by their very nature, elicit personal information both from quantitative data (age, gender, salary, type of employing agency) and qualitative

¹ Susan Hamburger, Archival Certification—Necessity or Nicety?, *SAA Research Forum*, Research Papers 2013, accessed at <http://files.archivists.org/pubs/proceedings/ResearchForum/2013/Hamburger-ResearchForumPaper2013.pdf>

data (multiple choice “why” questions, open-ended response opportunities). The author developed a sixteen-question online confidential and anonymous survey that solicited responses from a broad array of certified archivists. The survey launched on July 14, 2014 using Qualtrics and closed on August 18, 2014. A link to the survey was included in an email to the Archives & Archivists Listserv with a follow-up reminder extending the date to August 18 after the Society of American Archivists annual conference.

Results

The survey elicited 149 responses from certified archivists from a variety of archival institutions: the overwhelming majority were from academic libraries/archives, followed by government/tribal archives, corporate archives, museum archives, historical societies, religious archives, public library, and specialty archives.

The majority of respondents

- Are recently certified
- Believe in certification as a professional credential that forces them to remain current
- Have full-time, permanent jobs
- Report that certification is not a requirement of their current job
- Renew just in case it will help them get a new job
- Did not receive a financial reward for obtaining certification
- Believe certification improved their job performance

When asked an open-ended question about the benefits and drawbacks of archival certification, the respondents reported the benefits as

- Certification showed my employer that I had the credentials to take over responsibility of the archives.
- With so few jobs and an ever-growing pool of applicants, it's a small way to set yourself apart from the crowd.
- Certification should be a personal/professional goal within 1-2 years of employment. This helps support requests for workshops, travel to conferences, etc.
- ACA certification encourages professional development.

The respondents noted the drawbacks as

- The annual cost is frustrating.
- The financial burden to pay for professional development credits is not required of librarians and historians.
- I don't need a standardized test and pay an academy a yearly sum to validate my professional status.
- Certification doesn't help when applying for another job.
- I am not convinced the exam demonstrates anything beyond test-taking ability.
- The ACA has not been the networking opportunity I expected.

Conclusion

Overall, respondents are optimistic that if they sit for the certification exam someday the credential will be rewarded by employers, give them credibility outside the profession, and it is still good to have “just in case” they need it to get another job—assuming the next employer values certification as a credential. One of the most disturbing results of this survey is that when asked why they renewed their ACA membership, thirty-five of eighty respondents replied that renewing forces them to remain current in the field. What does it say about either our profession or our colleagues that they need to be forced to remain current rather than to be self-motivated?

Further research may answer questions raised by the responses to this survey. The archival profession has gradually moved from a male-dominated to a predominantly female profession since the 1940s. Women constituted seventy-four percent of the respondents to the current survey. One wonders if the vestiges of workplace discrimination—salary inequity, fewer promotions, less chance for advancement to management, the need to be better to be seen as competent—play a role in the accumulation of credentials to prove value and credibility.

The big question in this author’s mind is what is the future purpose of archival certification? Additional surveys by this author, or others, should investigate if archival certification’s role is to encourage continuing education, to encourage participation in professional conferences, to promote self-satisfaction, to support external recognition of credentials, and/or to provide an additional hiring credential. Questions that need to be asked include:

- Will the recently certified archivists renew membership in the ACA as they find that employers don’t require or reward certification?
- How sustainable is the ACA given the results of both of the author’s surveys?
- How long will archivists continue to pay for a credential that is not required or rewarded?
- How can a standardized test measure how well someone can function in a real world archival job?
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It is up to the new generation of archivists to determine the viability of archival certification.

References

Hamburger, Susan. Archival Certification—Necessity or Nicety? *SAA Research Forum*, Research Papers 2013, accessed at <http://files.archivists.org/pubs/proceedings/ResearchForum/2013/Hamburger-ResearchForumPaper2013.pdf>

Appendix A: Tables of Results

Institutions (n=143)	Number	Percent
Academic library/archives	38	55
Corporate archives	5	7
Government/tribal archives	22	31
Historical society	3	5
Museum archives	7	10
Public library	6	8
Other: Religious community archives, Science research library and archives, religious archives, Private sector corporation, Special collections library owned and operated by a local government, Manuscript repository/ independent library, Religious archives, For profit information resources management services firm, Library system, Independent school library, Archival services firm	19	27

Table 1. Institutional demographics.

Certified Archivists (n=159)	Number	Percent
Yes, by exam	133	84
Yes, grandfathered	16	10
No	10	6
No, planning to sit for exam	6	60
No, not planning to sit for exam	4	40

Table 2. Respondents with archival certification.

Year certified (n=146)	Number	Percent
between 2010 and 2014	63	43
between 2004 and 2009	39	27
between 1998 and 2003	21	14
between 1989 and 1997	14	10
before 1989 ²	9	6

Table 3. Year certified.

² SAA's Interim Board for Certification coordinated the certification-by-petition process and developed the first accreditation examination before the Academy of Certified Archivists was founded in 1989.

Membership renewed (n=146)	Number	Percent
renewed once and let lapse	5	3
didn't renew and let lapse	2	1
renewed every time and are current	49	34
renewed once and are current	31	21
haven't been certified long enough to renew	59	40

Table 4. ACA membership renewal.

Membership not renewed (n=56)	Number	Percent
couldn't afford the annual dues	4	8
are self-motivated to actively participate in professional development activities	4	8
report their employer does not require archival certification	2	4
no longer have archival duties on their job	1	2
provided other reasons:	45	90
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • haven't been certified long enough 	38	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retired 	1	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feels certification did not deliver benefits to the profession that were originally anticipated 	1	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • still involved in professional development activities but didn't get anything from ACA membership 	1	

Table 5. Reasons for not renewing ACA membership.

Membership renewed (n=201)	Number	Percent
believe in certification as a professional credential	65	81
support the ACA and gladly pay dues	45	56
renew in case a new job requires C.A.	40	50
renewing forces them to remain current in the field	36	45
provided other reasons:	15	19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • say their employer requires C.A. 	5	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a commitment to standards, professionalization, and seal of approval 	4	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hopes it helps get a new job 	1	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sees it as a personal goal toward learning and understanding records issues 	1	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see it as alternative to MLS or graduate degree 	2	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see no point in letting credential lapse 	2	

Table 6. Reasons for renewing ACA membership.

Employment (n=153)	Number	Percent
full-time, permanent	132	86
part-time, by choice	7	5
temporary (grant-funded, fixed-term)	6	4
unemployed and looking for work	4	3
no longer in the job market	3	2
full-time, contract or temporary	1	1
part-time seeking full-time, unpaid interns, or volunteers	0	0

Table 7. Employment status.

Employer required certification before or after hiring (n=145)	Number	Percent
No	125	86
Yes, after hiring	12	8
Yes, before hiring	8	6

Table 8. Employer requires certification.

Employer offered higher salary with certification (n=7)	Number	Percent
No	4	57
Yes	3	43

Table 9. Employer offered a higher salary if certified.

Employer offered pay salary increase after certification (n=12)	Number	Percent
No	11	92
Yes	1	8

Table 10. Employer offered a pay increase after certification.

Significance (n=142)	Number	Percent
Very Significant	10	14
Significant	37	52
Neutral	35	50
Insignificant	8	11
Very Insignificant	11	15

Table 11. Archival certification correlation with improved job performance.

Significance (n=148)	Number	Percent
Under \$20,000	1	1
\$20,000-29,999	6	4
\$30,000-39,999	28	19
\$40,000-49,999	29	20
\$50,000-59,999	32	22
\$60,000-\$75,000	31	21
Over \$75,000	21	14

Table 12. Annual salary range.

Significance (n=151)	Number	Percent
Male	40	26
Female	111	74

Table 13. Gender.

Appendix B: Certified Archivists Survey Questions

1. Did you obtain archival certification from the Academy of Certified Archivists?
 - Yes, by exam
 - Yes, grandfathered/grandmothered in
 - No

2. If No, Are you planning to sit for the exam?
 - Yes
 - No

3. If Yes, What year did you become a certified archivist?
 - before 1989
 - 1989-1997
 - 1998-2003
 - 2004-2009
 - 2010-2014

4. If certified, Did you renew your membership in the Academy of Certified Archivists and become recertified?
 - Yes, once and am current
 - Yes, once but membership has lapsed
 - Yes, at every renewal and am current
 - No, I haven't been certified long enough to renew
 - No, not since my initial certification and membership has lapsed

5. If did renew, Why did you renew your ACA membership? (Please select all that apply)

I believe in certification as a professional credential
I support the Academy of Certified Archivists and gladly pay my dues
Having to renew forces me to remain current in the field
I renew in case I need to look for a new job that will require a C.A.
Other, please specify

6. If did not renew, Why did you not renew your certification? (Please select all that apply)
- I could not afford the annual dues
 - My employer does not require archival certification
 - I am self-motivated to actively participate in professional development activities
 - My job no longer involves archival duties
 - Other, please specify
7. Are you currently employed?
- Yes, full-time permanent
 - Yes, part-time, seeking full-time
 - Yes, part time, by choice
 - Yes, temporary (grant-funded, fixed-term)
 - No, looking for work
 - No, no longer in the job market
 - No, unpaid internship
 - No, volunteering to get experience
8. If currently employed, Did your employer require you to be certified before or after hiring?
- Yes, before hiring
 - Yes, after hiring
 - My employer does not require me to be certified
9. If certification required before hiring, When you were hired, did your employer offer a higher salary because you are a certified archivist?
- Yes
 - No
10. If certification required after hiring, Did you or will you receive a pay increase when you became/become certified?
- Yes
 - No
11. If certified, In your opinion, how has archival certification improved your job performance?
- Very Significantly
 - Significantly
 - Neutral
 - Insignificantly
 - Very Insignificantly

12. Additional comments about the benefits or drawbacks of archival certification.

The following questions are for demographic purposes.

13. What academic degrees have you earned? (Please select all that apply)

Associates
Bachelors
Masters - Library Science
Masters - Archival Studies
Masters - Subject Specialization
Advanced Certificate in Archival Studies
Doctoral Candidate (A.B.D.)
Doctorate

14. What is your gender?

Male
Female

15. If currently employed, please categorize your current institution

Academic Library/Archives
Corporate Archives
Governmental/Tribal Archives
Historical Society
Museum Archives
Public Library
Other, please specify

16. What is your annual salary range, before taxes?

Under \$20,000
\$20,000 - \$29,999
\$30,000 - \$39,999
\$40,000 - \$49,999
\$50,000 - \$59,999
\$60,000 - \$75,000
Over \$75,000