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Strategies for Survival

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Strategies for Survival

One of my favorite Mark Twain quotes is: "Everyone complains about the weather, but no one does anything about it." The same might be said for the challenges that the archival profession faces. We are buffeted by the storms of limited resources, inadequate staffing, public misunderstanding, and administrative neglect. Our contributions to society and to our own institutions are often unrecognized or unappreciated, and yet we are expected to perform miracles for researchers and administrators in locating information and records at a moment's notice.

An SAA initiative in the 1980s focusing on "Archives and Society" concluded that, although archivists enjoyed respect and admiration for their work, their resource allocators (those who controlled funding for archival programs) perceived them as "mousy" and ineffective in commanding resources and power within their own institutions. The report, prepared by Sidney Levy and Albert Robles and entitled *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions*, concluded that the general public "does not seem well informed about archives, their locations and their contents." The identity of archivists is

only "vaguely conceptualized . . . and burdened by unexciting stereotypical elements." To improve their situation, Levy and Robles suggested, archivists should "communicate greater freshness and distinctiveness in imagery by their training, programs, self-assertion, publicity, advertising, and relevance to modern life."

It is time for a renewed focus on these concerns in order to educate the public about the importance and power embedded in archival records. We must expand our outreach efforts to increase public understanding of archives and archivists. It's time to do something about the bad weather.

In doing so, it is vital that we focus on the strategic issues that most affect our professional endeavors. In the past year, the SAA Council has taken some important steps to think strategically about how we can be successful in meeting the challenges that our profession faces. We have restructured our meeting agendas to focus on action items and to set aside time for strategic thinking and deliberation. Reports from officers, staff, and Council liaisons to committees, sections, and roundtables are now submitted in writing and are discussed only if necessary.

Although strategic planning has been part of the Council's annual agenda for at least 15 years (since my first time on Council), we are now emphasizing strategic

thinking as part of each Council meeting, rather than limiting it to a separate annual "planning day."

In February 2005, Council members and staff spent an entire day with planning facilitator Jim Dalton, author of the American Society of Association Executives' *From Scan to Plan*. Dalton presented a strategic governance model that suggests that associations such as SAA should devote 80% of their energy and effort to management concerns (delivering value to members) and 20% to leadership (thinking about the future, ensuring viability and adaptability). For a governing board such as the SAA Council, even more time should be devoted to leadership and planning concerns.

Dalton helped us frame a "radar screen" of about a dozen threats and challenges to the profession that we might consider to be our "strategic issues"—that is, critical concerns that "will have the greatest impact on the association's membership" and that are "within the association's capacity to act upon effectively," according to Dalton. To emphasize the importance of connecting strategic thinking to strategies for action, these issue statements are "reduced to single-sentence statements that define an arc of tension between two variables." A properly framed strategic issue, we learned, has the following attributes: 1) it captures a force at work in the environment that exists independently of the strategy makers; 2) it provides a reason to act without specifying what the action might be; 3) it is verifiable, in a manner that can be researched and documented; and 4) it is compelling, creating an urgent need to act.

Once the strategic issues have been defined, we then proceed through identifying the principles that should guide our decisions, targeting the desired outcomes of our actions, and then developing action plans to achieve the desired outcomes. Planning is hard work. As Dalton and other planning experts agree, it is an ongoing process rather than a single sequence of steps.

After a full day of strategic discussions in February, Council members rewrote and edited the dozen strategic issues that we had drafted and then spent another morning discussing and refining the issues and ranking them. Three strategic issues emerged as top priorities for action. (See page 5.) Between February and May, three Council subgroups refined these priority issues for further discussion at our spring meeting.

Council members are now in the process of conferring with key stakeholders, both within and beyond SAA, to clarify the strategic issues, understand what is already being done with respect to these concerns, and develop

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SAA Education Program News

SOLVEIG DESUTTER, Education Director

Photo Curriculum in Development

The SAA Education Program is in the process of developing a series of courses based on the forthcoming SAA publication, *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* (due out in 2006), by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler and Diane Vogt-O'Connor, with contributions by Helena Zinkham, Kit Peterson, and Brett Carnell. Once the courses have been developed, participants will be able to choose among a variety of photo-related topics, or progress from introductory to advanced workshops with discounted package fees.

The first course, tentatively titled "Understanding Photographs: Introduction to Archival Principles and Practices," presents the application of archival principles and practices to the administration of photo collections. The two-day course will be offered in the Washington, D.C., area in November 2005 and the registration fee will include a coupon for a complimentary copy of *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* when it is available next year from SAA.

Advanced courses will follow in 2006 and will address photo curatorship (photo identification, research and exhibition); description and cataloging; preservation; and outreach/public policy.

Web Seminar on Security Is a Success!

Although the jury is still out for many people in regard to Web

seminars, SAA's "Security in the Reading Room" seminar in early June was considered a success based on the following statistics:

- 42 sites registered for this program, with a total of 335 people in attendance.
- 25 sites had between 7 to 15 people participating, resulting in a \$9.66 to \$20 cost per person! Overall ratings ranged from Good (24%) to Very Good (50%) to Excellent (26%).
- Content ratings ranged from Good (14%) to Very Good (51%) to Excellent (35%).
- 95% of participants said that they would participate in another virtual seminar.

Comments from participants included: "Very useful and availability in virtual seminar format made our participation possible"; "Liked ability to interact"; "Excellent information, good instructor"; "Good session on an important topic"; and "I thought a lot of valuable information was relayed in 90 minutes. Excellent mix of theory and practice."

Fall Schedule

SAA's fall education schedule is nearly final, and we've started to schedule programs for 2006. Because programs are added throughout the year, be sure to check the Web site regularly so you that you don't miss the additions. Visit www.archivists.org/prof-education/seasonal_schedule.asp. ❖

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ideas for what might be done to address them. This ongoing process will truly be a balancing act, as we focus our attention—and our resources—on priority concerns; keep an eye on the other issues on the "radar screen" to ensure that our priorities shift as appropriate; and develop and act on an "internal radar screen" for critical issues that SAA faces as an association.

Throughout this process, it is absolutely critical that the SAA Council and staff do not act in isolation. Council members will be discussing these issues with the leaders of SAA committees, sections, and roundtables at the Annual Meeting in New Orleans in August, and I will meet with these leaders during a forum on August 17.

I invite SAA members and all archivists to consider these issues and to send comments or suggestions to the Council subgroups that are coordinating each issue. This important process requires the attention and creative energy of the entire profession as we prepare for the future. Although we can't prevent hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes, we can at least prepare for them. ❖

House Subcommittee Restores NHPRC Funding

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letter states, "The board is important because it would help identify documents that truly should or should not be classified. Too much secrecy hinders the operation of the government and hides problems that often need public disclosure to be remedied."

Archives Thief Gets Two Years

A Virginia man who took more than 100 Civil War-era documents from the National Archives and sold them on eBay and elsewhere over the Internet has been sentenced to two years in jail and ordered to pay a \$10,000 fine.

Howard Harner reportedly grossed more than \$47,000 for the items that were sold to history buffs. More than 60 documents are still missing. Authorities caught Harner after a Civil War researcher noticed the sale of a letter written by Confederate Brig. General Lewis A. Armistead on e-Bay that he recalled seeing when he was conducting research at a NARA facility. According to Archivist of the United States Allen Weinstein, "This sentence sends a very clear signal that theft of cultural property belonging to the American people will not be tolerated." ❖