

SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics

Overview

The [*Core Values of Archivists*](#) and the [*Code of Ethics for Archivists*](#) are intended to be used together to guide individuals who perform archival labor or who work in archival environments. These aspirational values and ethical principles help shape SAA's expectations for professional actions and engagement.

In summary, archivists should strive to:

- Expand access and usage opportunities for users, and potential users, of archival records.
- Actively contribute ideas and resources to our field's body of theoretical and practical scholarship.
- Cultivate collaborative opportunities not only with creators, users, and colleagues, but with any interested parties who wish to engage with archival records.
- Develop and follow professional standards that promote transparency and mitigate harm.
- Respect the diversity found in humanity and advocate for archival collections to reflect that rich complexity.
- Recognize the importance of professional education and development by supporting lifelong learning for themselves and others.
- Devise environmentally sustainable techniques for preserving collections and serving communities.
- Create mentorship opportunities for library school students, new professionals, and any individual in the archives field who seeks to enrich their work experience.
- Actively share their knowledge and expertise with creators, users, and colleagues.

While many archivists are committed to incorporating these ethical and core values into their work, we acknowledge that, both historically and currently, not all members of the profession abide by these beliefs or guidelines. We also acknowledge that archivists and archival practices are never neutral. The goal of this document is to move the profession toward a more inclusive, ethical, and accountable community of archival practice.

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Core Values of Archivists

Archivists conduct vital work, including:

- Identifying and preserving essential records that document the cultural heritage of society.

- Organizing and maintaining the documentary record of institutions, groups, communities, and individuals.
- Assisting in the process of interpreting documentation of past events through the use of primary source materials.
- Serving a broad range of people who seek to locate and use the information found in evidentiary records.

The modern archives profession endeavors to ground its theoretical foundations and functions in a set of core values that guides all the practices and activities of archivists, both individually and collectively. These core values embody what our field stands for and should inform the professional actions of SAA's membership. But it should be noted that the historical records held within archives often afford the most power to those who create and control the archive itself. In a democratic society, such power should benefit each individual equally. Hence, archivists should ensure that their professional guidelines empower them to equitably provide labor and resources in service of all members of society.

Accordingly, this statement of core archival values articulates a set of principles that serve both as a reminder of how archivists should strive to engage professionally and as a primer for contextualizing archivists' role in a greater societal sense. Archivists are often subjected to competing claims and imperatives that may pull in conflicting directions. These core values can guide archivists when making professional decisions, serving as a lens through which they can examine complex ethical concerns that may arise during their work.

Access and Use: Access to records is essential in all personal, community, academic, business, and government settings. Archivists should promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of materials, while respecting legal and ethical access restrictions including public statutes, cultural protections, donor contracts, and privacy requirements. While access may be justifiably limited in some instances, archivists still seek to foster open access and unrestricted use as broadly as possible when appropriate.

The goal of use should be considered during every phase of acquisition, description, and access. Even individuals who do not directly use archival materials still benefit indirectly from research, public programs, and other forms of archival work, including an increased awareness that records exist, are being cared for, and can be accessed when needed. Accordingly, use of documentary records should be actively promoted and protected by archivists.

Accountability: Archivists help maintain documentary evidence of actions by individuals, groups, and organizations. By preserving records of societal experiences, functions, activities, and decision-making, archivists provide important resources for contemporary and future entities seeking accountability.

In the public sphere, leaders must be held accountable both to the judgment of history and future generations, as well as to citizens in the ongoing governance of society. In the private sector, archival documentation assists in protecting the rights and interests of consumers, shareholders, employees, individuals, and communities. Preserving evidentiary records for both public and private entities creates a mechanism to cultivate transparency within organizations and can help make power imbalances visible.

Advocacy: Archivists promote the use and understanding of the historical record, while also serving as advocates for their own archival programs and organization's needs. Advocacy for archivists and archival work can take many forms, including: contributing to the formation of public policy related to archival and recordkeeping issues, ensuring that archivists' expertise is used in the public's interest, and making the utility and value of archival work understood locally and beyond. Building support and understanding for all forms of archival labor is necessary to secure the vital resources required to continue our work and to ensure continued access to materials held within archives.

Diversity: Archivists collectively seek to document and preserve the record of the broadest possible range of individuals, communities, governance, and organizations. Archivists respectfully work to build and promote archival collections that document a multiplicity of viewpoints on social, political, and intellectual issues.

Within our organizations: Archivists must embrace the importance of identifying, preserving, and working with communities to actively document those whose voices have been underrepresented or marginalized. It is critical to forge connections with under-documented communities and individuals, support preservation of records relating to those communities' activities, encourage use of archival research sources, and support the formation of community-based archives. Building collections that reflect the diversity of humanity is key to preserving a historical record that encompasses the stories of all peoples, instead of just those who wield enough power and influence to ensure their lives are documented.

Within our field at large: Archival education programs, professional organizations, and hiring institutions must work to develop practices and policies that center the recruitment, retention, and ongoing support of inclusive communities of practice. It is not enough to collect the history of diverse peoples—the archives profession must constantly work toward creating anti-oppressive environments that encourage participation from people across the spectrum of experience.

The [SAA Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#) provides further guidance in this area.

History and Memory: Archival materials provide digital and physical surrogates for human memory, both individually and collectively, and serve as evidence against which individual and social memory can be compared. While the historical record cannot be defined by a single document, collection, or memory, archivists recognize that primary sources allow people to examine past events and gain insight into human experiences.

Preservation: Archivists serve as stewards for primary sources in all formats, striving to identify sustainable preservation strategies so that materials can be accessible for continued future use. Preserving materials is a means to this end, not an end in itself. Within prescribed law and best-practice standards, archivists must determine how original materials can best be preserved through a combination of activities including condition monitoring, creation of physical and digital surrogates, and environmental controls in areas where materials are processed, used, and stored.

Responsible Stewardship: As responsible stewards, archivists commit to making ethical and transparent decisions about how to provide care for the documents, records, and materials entrusted to them. Archivists should develop stewardship models that account for internal and

external needs, creating best practices that not only reflect archival expertise, but that can also adapt in response to stakeholders' needs and suggestions.

Responsible stewardship also means considering a repository's realistic capacity for care when deciding to acquire or deaccession materials. To maintain trustworthy relationships with creators and support the institutional mission of an archival organization, ethical distribution of available resources should be a part of every strategic conversation throughout the lifecycle of all materials in a repository's holdings.

Selection: Archivists make choices about which materials to steward based on a wide range of criteria. They accept the responsibility of serving as active agents in shaping and interpreting the documentation of the past. The cost of long-term preservation and ongoing challenges of accessibility prevent most of the documents and records created in modern society from being kept in perpetuity. Understanding this, archivists recognize the wisdom of seeking advice from other stakeholders during all processes that result in the selection of materials for an archive's holdings. They also acknowledge that the power wielded to select materials does not diminish or usurp the authority held by the creators or sources of these materials.

Service: Archivists serve numerous constituencies and stakeholders. Within the mandates and missions of their organizations, archivists provide connections to primary sources so that (any) users, whoever they may be, can discover and benefit from the archival record of society, its institutions, and individuals.

Social Responsibility: Undergirding the professional activities of all archivists are their responsibilities to society and the greater public good. Archivists, in their various roles and duties, contribute to preserving individual and community memory for their specific constituencies and, in so doing, help increase the overall social awareness and understanding of past events. The archival record is part of the cultural heritage of all members of society. As such, archivists strive to uphold their social responsibilities through equitable, clearly defined policies and procedures for selection, preservation, access, and use of the archival record.

Sustainability: Archivists should root their work in an ethics of care that prioritizes sustainable practices and policies. Caring for collections and serving communities—along with developing acquisition, processing, storage, and service models—must necessarily involve an ongoing awareness of the impact of archival work on the environment. As stewards of the historical record, archivists should be mindful of the ways in which their professional work can function both as harmful force and reparative resource.

(Approved by the SAA Council in May 2011; revised August 2020.)

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Code of Ethics for Archivists

Archives are created by a wide array of individuals and groups, providing and protecting evidence of human activity and social organization. Archivists endeavor to ensure that materials entrusted to their care will be accessible over time. They should embrace principles that foster the transparency of their actions and that inspire confidence in the profession. A

distinct body of ethical norms helps archivists navigate complex situations and issues that can arise during the course of their work.

The Society of American Archivists is a membership organization comprising individuals and organizations dedicated to the selection, care, preservation, access to, and administration of historical and documentary records of enduring value for the benefit of current and future generations.

The Society endorses this *Code of Ethics for Archivists* as principles of the profession. This Code should be read in conjunction with SAA's *Core Values of Archivists*. Together they provide guidance to archivists and address and increase awareness of ethical concerns among archivists, their colleagues, and the rest of society. As advocates for collections under their care, archivists aspire to carry out their professional activities with the highest standard of professional conduct. The behaviors and characteristics outlined in this *Code of Ethics for Archivists* should serve as aspirational principles for archivists to consider as they strive to create trusted archival organizations.

[Case studies](#) that are drawn from real life and that address one or more of the areas covered by the *Code of Ethics for Archivists* have been published by SAA's Committee on Ethics and Professional Conduct (CEPC).

Professional Relationships: Archivists strive to cooperate and collaborate with other archivists in the profession, as well as with all individuals, communities, and organizations performing archival work. In their professional relationships with donors, records creators, users, communities, and colleagues, archivists should be as respectful, honest, transparent, empathetic, and equitable as possible.

Judgment: While no element of archival work is unbiased or neutral, archivists still strive to exercise their ethical, professional judgment in the appraisal, acquisition, and processing of materials. Decisions should always be made mindfully, aiming to ensure the preservation, authenticity, diversity, and lasting cultural and historical value of materials. Archivists should be transparent about their role in the selection, retention, and creation of the historical record by carefully documenting all collections-related policy decisions, including preservation treatments, descriptive work, processing activities, and access guidelines. Archivists are encouraged to consult with colleagues, relevant professionals, creators, and constituent communities to ensure that diverse perspectives inform their actions and decisions throughout the stewardship process.

Authenticity: Archivists use appraisal and evidentiary provenance documentation to provide transparent information about the authenticity and origin of archival materials. Using archival description, they document the unique archival characteristics of records, including their intellectual, digital, and physical integrity. Archivists should not willfully alter, manipulate, or destroy data or records to conceal facts or distort evidence. Archivists thoroughly document any actions they take that may cause changes to the records in their care or raise questions about the records' authenticity.

Security and Protection: Archivists protect all materials for which they are responsible. They guard all records against accidental damage, vandalism, and theft. They take steps to minimize the deterioration of records and implement security policies to protect all records in

every format. Archivists have well-considered plans in place to respond to any situation that might threaten the safety of their holdings, their patrons, and their staff.

Access and Use: Archivists actively promote open and equitable access to records in their care as much as possible. They strive to minimize restrictions and maximize ease of access. They facilitate the continuing accessibility of archival materials in all formats. Archivists formulate and disseminate access policies that encourage ethical and responsible use. They work with creators, donors, organizations, and communities to ensure that any restrictions applied are appropriate, well-documented, and equitably enforced. When repositories require restrictions to protect confidential and proprietary information, such restrictions should be applied consistently. Archivists should seek to balance the principles of stewardship, access, and respect.

Privacy: Archivists recognize that privacy is an inherent fundamental right and sanctioned by law. They establish procedures and policies to protect the interests of the donors, individuals, groups, and organizations whose public and private lives and activities are documented in archival holdings. As appropriate and mandated by law, archivists place access restrictions on collections to ensure that privacy and confidentiality are maintained, particularly for individuals and groups who have had no voice or role in collections' creation, retention, or public use. Archivists should maintain transparency when placing these restrictions, documenting why and for how long they will be enacted. Archivists promote the respectful use of culturally sensitive materials in their care by encouraging researchers to consult with those represented by records, recognizing that privacy has both legal and cultural dimensions. Archivists respect all users' rights to privacy by maintaining the confidentiality of their research and protecting any personal information collected about the users in accordance with their institutions' policies.

Trust: Archivists should not take advantage of their privileged access to and control of records and collections. They execute their work knowing that they must ensure proper custody for the materials entrusted to them. Archivists should demonstrate professional integrity and avoid potential conflicts of interest. They seek to balance the rights, interests, needs, and suggestions of all people and groups affected by archival decisions.

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