Ask me why archives are important, and I’ll answer that they provide essential evidence to protect and enhance our rights as citizens. Or I’ll answer that they provide the fundamental information that supports and shapes our understanding of historical events.

Then you ask me how do I know that? And the only thing I can do is answer with a story, if I can even think of one:

● I can tell you about how a Dakota woman found a 19th century enrollment register that helped secure her claim to tribal membership and the benefits attendant to that.

● Or, I can talk about a History Day kid who used evidence in the papers of Walter Mondale to create a standout project on the changing role of the vice-presidency.

These stories are important. They make things clear to people. They take the abstract explanation and make it real. We can’t get anywhere without stories. Stories that are true, impactful. Stories that demonstrate, in one clear instance, how archives made a difference, how archives changed lives.

Those stories are our professional elevator speeches. We use those stories to make our case—with our bosses, with our donors, with media reps, with legislators, with funders.

But stories are only half of the equation. They are great, they are necessary, but they cannot be the only way that we convey the value of archives. They can’t carry the load on their own. To do what they do best, they need to be supported by data. Real numbers, the evidence of many, many outcomes. Number of researchers served. The added social value of archives. Dollars generated in the local economy. The number of visitors who support increased funding for NHPRC.
The compelling human stories need to sit, like gems, on top of a mountain of data—boring, dull, tedious numbers—that, in its own way, is as compelling as the narratives that it supports. And, unfortunately, those data that are so necessary to us now are not the data that we have traditionally occupied ourselves in collecting. We, who are so good at counting every catalog record produced and every archival folder used, have been remarkably poor at counting the things that might actually demonstrate the real and true value of what we do. Not the things we do, but the value of what we do.

We archivists have long struggled with the challenge of demonstrating the “value” of archives via anything resembling objective measures. We know too little about whom we serve, how much they gain from their interactions with our holdings, and about the practical impact of our work to make an effective case about resource needs, return on investment, or “value.”

A big part of the problem is that our previous attempts at gathering data have simply been too self-referential to answer the questions that I posed a minute ago. Archivists just can’t make a convincing case for resources by basing our arguments on who we archivists are, how many collections we hold, or how many times those collections will stretch to the moon and back. No one cares. At least, no one outside of this room cares.

Instead, we need to develop a very different understanding, one supported by sufficient amounts of meaningful data. An understanding of:

- who our users are,
- what services they value,
- how they want to utilize our collections,
- and then—crucially— which potential users we are not serving.

In effect, we must stop focusing on supply---what we’ve got---and begin focusing on demand: that is, the users of our archives and the uses to which they put them. We must shift the focus from what we do to what our users do. We must also understand
the real economic impact of archives and archivists on their communities: employment, local spending, educational contributions, volunteer opportunities created, and participation in tourism.

Our colleagues in museums and libraries are a couple jumps ahead of us, and have been grappling with these problems of economic impact and user success. The Center for the Future of Museums and its less developed protégé at ALA are making some progress in amassing, and then evaluating, data that can buttress the stories of impact and value that they tell about their professions. Their data-driven explorations are helping them to appreciate changes in the composition and requirements of their audiences, and then helping them to see how they can address those changes to provide continuing value.

We need to go there, too. To catch up to our peers, who are least beginning to understand what they need to do to better address their consumers, and to thereby set better directions for ourselves, we archivists must begin to do several things. We need to identify data elements that are key to making this user-focused value proposition. We must find the useful data that have already been collected by archivists and other communities, including entities like IMLS and the Cultural Data Project. We must develop more thoughtful and nimble surveying strategies that allow us to keep incrementing essential data in a sustainable way. We must develop a structure to hold and manage these data to make them mashable and freely available to all repositories, archival associations, communities and stakeholders. We must develop dashboards and similar resources to help archivists and stakeholders make their advocacy cases in ways that are truly compelling.
About Museums

Museums Do That?

American Alliance of Museums

- There are over 850 million visits to American museums per year—more than attendees of all major sporting events and theme parks combined.
- Museums directly contribute more than $21 billion to the national economy.
- 400,000 people nationwide are employed by museums.
- Museums invest more than $2 billion a year in education.

Museums are wonderfully diverse. They are operated by nonprofits and for-profits, colleges, universities and every level of government. Some are managed by large staffs; others are run solely by volunteers. They include all types:

- Aquarium
- Anthropology
- Arboretum/Botanic Garden
- Art
- Children’s
- Culturally Specific
- Hall of Fame
- Historic House
- Historic Site
- History
- Historical Society
- Military/Battlefield
- Nature Center
- Natural History
- Planetarium
- Presidential Library
- Science/Technology
- Specialized
- Transportation
- Visitor Center
- Zoo

Join us!

Membership is the foundation for excellence and unites the field.

The Bookstore

The most informative and authoritative professional literature on every aspect of museum operations.
We’ve been fretting about relevance for nearly as long as I’ve been an archivist. Here is a chance to start developing the repository of data that can demonstrate relevance. How
great would it be to sit down with a legislator and be able to speak convincingly about the economic returns generated by spending a dollar on archives funding. Or to be able to say conclusively that “X” number of voters were served by archival repositories in her district.

So, this is where I intend to double-down during the year of my presidency. To start compiling and analyzing the data that can support and contextualize archival advocacy. In doing so I hope to add some muscle to the great advocacy work that Kathleen has done over the past year—to really keep that effort moving forward. This is certainly not the only strategic priority that SAA has—diversifying our profession and the archival record is equally important. And Council will throw a lot of weight toward moving the needle in that area. But to every degree possible, I want to amass the data that helps demonstrate the value of archives.

A small team of us, supported by the SAA staff, are paving the way for a small planning grant to map out the substantial work that lies ahead of us. As that planning leads to implementation, there will be roles for all SAA members to play. I sincerely hope that you will all find a way to join me in this important work.

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