

The SAA as Sisyphus: Education Since the 1960s

Fredric M. Miller

Abstract

Approximately thirty years ago, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) embarked on an effort to standardize and possibly accredit archival education at the graduate level. American archivists and manuscripts curators have traditionally had extensive graduate training in history. In terms of what archival education should be, however, there was simply no consensus on basic matters. Moreover, such consensus was essential to any national education program. Miller's paper examined the various options through 1983 and concluded that in the end, the Society lacked both the will and the resources to accredit graduate programs. Using Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* as a metaphor for the Society of American Archivists' efforts to standardize the educational process, Miller suggested that the Society examine alternative means of formalizing graduate-level education. While not suggesting any particular changes, Miller urged the Society to consider the existence of other possibilities.

I think I should begin by explaining my title. About a dozen years ago, the SAA embarked on an effort to standardize and eventually accredit archival education at the graduate level. At the start of that effort, Robert Warner wrote in the summary of his education survey that "official accrediting by the Society seems unfeasible at this time."¹ There followed a decade of work, proceeding steadily toward the adoption of Guidelines for Archival Education, beyond to plans for archival certification, and, finally, to the very brink of a test for an accreditation visit.² Then, in 1981 the Education Committee

Fredric Miller originally presented this paper in October 1983 at the Society of American Archivists' annual meeting. Previously unpublished, this address remains a well-known plea for a renewed investigation into the accreditation and standardization of archival training programs. Using a typewritten copy and clues provided by Richard J. Cox, Thomas Teper researched and constructed the previously absent footnotes for publication. Frank Cook, the SAA's archivist, provided source information for citations taken from the *SAA Newsletter*, committee notes, and letters. Naomi Miller, Fredric Miller's wife, read the final draft and assisted in the paper's final preparation. Except for light copyediting, the text is as it appeared in Miller's original document.

¹ Robert Warner, "Archival Training in U.S. and Canada," *American Archivist* 35 (July/October 1972): 357.

² Society of American Archivists, "Archival Education Guidelines," *SAA Newsletter* (May 1977): 4-5.

decided “to suspend any further effort to pursue these proposals at this time.”³ Perhaps it was the phrase “at this time” in both reports that led me to remember my college reading of the myth of Sisyphus. In Albert Camus’ version, it begins, “The Gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” Now, an important part of Sisyphus’ story is that it does not criticize his skill or his diligence. In fact, we are told that he was “the wisest and most prudent of mortals.” So my limited analogy between Sisyphus and the SAA in no way reflects on the quality of the work done by many people over the years. But it is intended to shift attention to the larger theater in which our Society’s efforts took place. To summarize my thesis—the Society worked in a historical and social context, and with intellectual and institutional restraints, that naturally led to procedures and guidelines that could not justify the effort needed to enforce them. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with the guidelines and procedures. However, I do think there was a considerable amount of inevitability about the final decision not to attempt accreditation, to avoid the logistical culmination of the Society’s decade-long effort. So, in the archival spirit, I hope that examining how this result came about in the recent past may help guide us in the near future.

Several key determining patterns were already established by the mid-nineteen sixties. Archivists were aware that theirs was a somewhat marginal profession. Of the standard professional attributes—work autonomy, a common core of highly specialized knowledge, entry through controlled higher education, control of the job market—archivists possessed none. Yet then as now, few would have denied that full-time archivists were a profession of some sort. This is crucial, for I believe that the reputation of archivists derived first from this association with cultural and intellectual resources, and second from their historical expertise in terms of their own repositories. The situation is comparable to that of museum curators. American archivists and manuscripts curators traditionally had extensive graduate training in history. A 1970 SAA survey showed that 64 percent of the more than four hundred members who replied had a graduate degree, with one-sixth holding the Ph.D.⁴ Archivists’ reputations as individuals had little to do with the sociological attributes of archival work as a profession.

Our status could hardly have derived from the graduate archival education system. As of 1968, aside from a two-week Modern Archives Institute in Washington, there were only eight universities offering courses in archival

³ “Education Committee Submits Summary Report.” *SAA Newsletter* (March 1982): 10.

⁴ Frank B. Evans and Robert M. Warner, “American Archivists and Their Society: A Composite View,” *American Archivist* 34 (April 1971): 170.

operations, four of which gave one-semester library school courses. H.G. Jones put the matter succinctly that year when he wrote, “We archivists have failed in our responsibility to our profession—if it is indeed a profession—to provide adequate, regular and comprehensive training.”⁵ The problems went beyond the scarcity of courses. Presumably, these courses did at least meet the limited demand. Even in 1970, half of those answering the SAA survey had attended a related course or workshop. But there was a deep, fundamental concern about the direction and content of archival courses beyond simple definitions, the idea of provenance and some examples of “how we do it here.” The debate of the sixties between Jones and Schellenberg about whether library schools or history departments were the best places for archival education continued through the 1970s, until everyone decided the issue had been talked out.⁶ But it was, and remains, symptomatic of the lack of basic professional definition and common practice—let alone research and theory. These deficiencies are still with us today [1983], but they were far worse fifteen years ago, when, for instance, archival methods of collective arrangement and description had barely penetrated beyond large public repositories, and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities funding did not exist as a spur to standardization. There was simply no consensus on basic matters, and such consensus is essential to any national education program.

The intellectual and technical problems were matched by institutional ones. The National Archives has traditionally avoided a national leadership role, and its record in education supports that tradition. NARS [National Archives and Records Service] has relied on short institutes and workshops for post-appointment training of people who generally have had academic history backgrounds. When in 1969 Jones proposed a graduate-level Institute on Archives and Records Management with full-time professors, NARS did actually set up a task force to study the idea. But they decided that involvement in such an institute was inadvisable on intellectual, bureaucratic, and economic grounds, also citing the lack of proven demand.⁷ The SAA, which was then a small organization, without a permanent office or a full-time staff, was also unable to provide leadership.

The result of the absence of central direction and common standards was the growth of scattered, small programs centered around enterprising individuals. The legacy of a group of well-established programs conducted by promi-

⁵ H. G. Jones, “Archival Training in American Universities, 1938–1968,” *American Archivist* 31 (April 1968): 148.

⁶ For examples of writings pertaining to this debate, see, Jones, “Archival Training in American Universities, 1938–1968” and T. R. Schellenberg, “Archival Training in Library Schools,” *American Archivist* 31 (January 1968): 155–66. Both articles provide insight into the attitudes of the participants.

⁷ H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation: Their Management, Preservation, and Use* (New York: Atheneum, 1969): 216–24.

ment archivists was to be crucial in the 1970s. Given the context in which they operated—including for example the lack of basic instructional materials—it is an impressive tribute to these programs that they have done an excellent job of meeting the profession's entry-level requirements. But we have made too much of a virtue out of necessity. American archivists often compare our loose, even anarchic, situation with the highly structured systems of continental Europe. There are, of course, complex historical reasons for the differences, but it occasionally appeared as if our lack of coordination was considered a peculiarly American virtue that set us above antiquated and authoritarian old Europe. However, such invidious comparisons were somewhat belied by the effort to rationalize American archival education begun by the SAA around 1970.⁸

We cannot understand the ensuing developments without reminding ourselves of the economic context. During the late sixties there was a continual expansion in both funding for higher education and the number of archival positions available. These two developments dovetailed with the collapse of the academic job market in the early seventies. After 1970 there were more graduate history programs and more archival jobs, especially in colleges and universities, than ever before, but fewer teaching jobs in history. This ironic congruence was the engine that kept driving the expansion of graduate archival education. There was finally a market—a substantial group of employers and potential employees who wanted graduate courses; the former to upgrade operations and justify salaries, the latter to compete in a tight job market. The graduate history backgrounds of most senior archivists and many new entrants reinforced the expansionist tenor of the times in graduate schools, and a few courses did exist to serve as models. No one could maintain, however, that graduate education was needed because a new field had emerged, as was the case with records management, for example. There was instead the challenge of regulating a system that was rapidly growing as a result of economic forces. Of the fifteen education programs in the United States and Canada covered in the SAA's first survey in 1971, eleven were less than six years old.⁹

That survey marked the start of a burst of activity in the early seventies which set the Society on the path it was to follow until 1981. The expansion of programs had not gone unnoticed within the small confines of the SAA. A survey of the field was mandated, and was carried out by the Committee on Education and Training, chaired by Robert Warner. They found seven single courses and eight programs of two or more courses, all obviously one-man or

⁸ Philip P. Mason, "The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970's," *American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 193–217. Further commentary on this aspect of the article is available in "Report of the Committee of the 1970's: The Council's Response," *American Archivist* 35 (July/October 1972): 359–67 and Philip P. Mason, "Archives in the Seventies: Promises and Fulfillment," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 199–206. This article provides a more complete examination of this topic.

⁹ Warner, "Archival Training," 51.

one-woman operations, in either a history department or library school setting.¹⁰ The courses were generally taught by people with history backgrounds, and were broken down into introductory courses covering basic operations, as in the NARS Institute, and advanced courses emphasizing “hands-on” experience. Most of the students were not planning to be archivists, so there was no market for an elaborate program. Warner’s report recommended an SAA-sponsored teachers conference and an intensification of Society involvement with archival education.

While the survey was underway, the SAA’s Committee on the Seventies was preparing its own recommendations, which had a great impact on the Society’s structure and operations. The education and training section of its 1972 report was written by two highly qualified authors, Frank Evans of the United States and Hugh Taylor of Canada. Recognizing that “as a Society we have taken little positive action,” they called for such action to formulate guidelines and set standards regarding faculty qualifications, curriculum design, and instructional materials for a range of courses, institutes, and workshops. In their view, the priority was to “first define minimum standards, then apply them to existing education and training offerings.”¹¹ However, they were against any effort to accredit courses or workshops, since this could not be enforced in hiring; and they were also against separate degree programs. They endorsed instead the development of “a solid area of specialization within existing programs for an M.A. or a Ph.D.”¹² They added that the teachers should be experienced archivists and that an internship should be a part of all programs.

These crucial recommendations received a decisive ratification in March 1973 when the SAA’s conference of ten educators met in Ann Arbor. A list of fifteen subjects that should be covered in any academic program was endorsed, and it was recommended that faculty should have at least five years administrative experience and a graduate degree. Reflecting contemporary practice, the subject list included the history and state of archives, definitions, basic operations (which accounted for nine of the fifteen items), non-manuscript records, and a practicum. Later in 1973 one conference suggestion was implemented as the Society issued its first education directory. It found a large and receptive audience. Cynics might argue that, in the ensuing ten years, we have not progressed much beyond the basic list of topics and a Society publication that lists courses that exist but are not approved.

The cynics might be right. In retrospect, most of the key decisions about graduate archival education were made in the short period that included the Warner Survey, the Committee on the Seventies and the Ann Arbor conference. By the time the latter was held, there was a significant number of strong

¹⁰ Warner, “Archival Training,” 352.

¹¹ Mason, “Society of American Archivists in the Seventies,” 206.

¹² Mason, “Society of American Archivists in the Seventies,” 210.

programs which were doing quite well without outside help or interference. One prominent participant in the Ann Arbor conference compared that gathering of educational entrepreneurs to the 1957 Apalachin conference of Mafia chieftains. We need not go that far to note that the end result was to ratify the status quo and limit the potential competition. The Society and the educators in effect endorsed pre-appointment graduate training confined to a few basic courses, taught by practicing archivists at an undetermined number of schools in undetermined departments, conspicuously avoiding the history versus library issue. The thrust of the SAA's work over the next few years was to give definite structure and support to that already-existing system—through guidelines, directories, and manuals, rather than to try to create a different system. This approach had clear implications. Accepting archives as a specialization, generally a minor, within a larger graduate program meant that any archival claim to professional expertise would still rely mainly on the larger field, American history or library science. The emphasis on practicing teachers ensured that no full-time faculty would emerge, and therefore little of the research base and theoretical structure that a full-time faculty can provide. And the endorsement of a list of basic topics to be covered everywhere meant that there was little impetus for anyone to develop a different kind of education program, perhaps more theoretical, perhaps more managerial. Agreement had instead been reached at the level of the lowest common denominator. These decisions flowed logically from the situation of the early seventies, and it is hard to envision realistic alternatives. However, they also sowed the seeds of future difficulties.

In the three years following the Ann Arbor conference, the Society's newly strengthened Committee on Education and Professional Development, under Maynard Brichford, Mabel Deutrich, and Jerry Ham, successively, created a formal set of Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs. The Committee's work between 1973 and 1976 was carried out in some isolation, though it did rely heavily on the work of Hugh Taylor and Edwin Welch in developing an M.A. in archives for programs in Canada. There was little involvement of the American library and historical professions, probably because of their notoriously low level of interest in archival affairs. More surprisingly, during those four years, the *American Archivist* carried no articles on archival education. Yet important changes were taking place. The rapid expansion of graduate programs continued. The 1976 Education Directory listed seventeen multi-course offerings and twenty-three single courses.¹³ The SAA became a more substantial organization with the hiring of a full-time executive director and staff. The NHPRC Records Program and increased NEH funding created a demand for newly minted archivists. But on the less positive side, and just as important, there were no parallel intellectual or pedagogical advances to give

¹³ Society of American Archivists, *Education Directory* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1976), 1.

the emerging curriculum more substance in terms of traditional graduate study. Despite some progress, there was still no body of common practice, research studies, and theory on which to base more than the laundry list of operations that had emerged from the Ann Arbor conference (and which formed the core of most new courses). The situation is best represented by the useful but aptly-titled *Basic Manual Series* issued by the SAA in 1977, the same year as the Guidelines were approved by the SAA Council.

To summarize them briefly, the Guidelines provide for a three-part program of “at least one year’s study, which included equal emphasis on archival theory, laboratory work and the opportunity for specialized projects through independent study.”¹⁴ The total credit hours should at least total those required for a graduate minor, the university should have adequate institutional resources (including its own archives), and the instructor should have at least five years’ administrative experience. The Guidelines are fairly specific about the topics to be included within the five parts of the general theory course; the nature of archives, acquisitions, processing, use and administration. Most Education Committee members regarded the practicum, or laboratory element, as central to their proposal, and a separate set of practicum guidelines was issued in 1979.¹⁵ This suggested at least 140 hours of work in a semester, focusing on acquisitions, processing, preservation, and reference. The need for substantial and varied institutional resources, and a small class size, was stressed. However, the special effort that went into defining this necessary but elementary internship perhaps reflects unfavorably on the profession’s priorities in terms of graduate education.

As someone who has essentially offered the approved three-part program at Temple University for the past four years (and even took three such courses at Wisconsin ten years ago) I have no trouble with the Guidelines, as far as they go. They provide for an efficient, minimum program of entry-level training, although not genuine graduate education. They assume the existence of a broader graduate degree program in which supporting and ancillary skills are obtained. Further, they assume that people will update their training through continuing education if they do become full-time archivists. For the novice, a program based on the Guidelines can provide (1), a sound introduction to what we have to do in the way of agreed theory and practice; (2), some real experience for the resume; and (3), the chance to acquire a specialized expertise. It is the reality of American graduate education that this kind of program is the only possibility short of a master’s degree. Unless we are able to come up with

¹⁴ Society of American Archivists, “Archival Education Guidelines,” 4–5.

¹⁵ “Guidelines for Graduate Education Programs,” *SAA Education Directory: 1978* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1978), 5–6. A contemporary analysis of the Guidelines’ prospects is available in Lawrence J. McCrank, “Prospects for Integrating Historical and Information Studies in Archival Education,” *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979): 443–55.

fifteen different courses—stretching ourselves out as I think the library schools have—then a limited sequence is the only alternative.

Of course this does not mean that the Guidelines provide us with a satisfactory graduate program. Here we must distinguish between the immediate needs of entry-level students and those of the profession as a whole. The Guidelines have been criticized from the beginning for being overly vocational, for training processors in effect, and for being unintegrated with any wider program of historiography or information science. These criticisms are valid yet somewhat irrelevant. The Guidelines accorded with the existing needs of students, employers and, particularly, instructors. As Ruth Helmuth put it in the fall 1981 *American Archivist*, “The reality of the situations in which the majority of the members of the [Education] Committee operated were [*sic*] the dominating factor” in the decision to make the program the equivalent of a graduate minor.¹⁶ No one was about to get hired as a full-time, tenured professor of archives. But while this did not adversely affect students looking for their first job, it did mean that the Committee’s proposals offered no way out of a situation that severely limited the development of professional education beyond basic training. Archival studies was still a minor in someone else’s program with only one substantive course to offer, and our own guidelines encouraged a part-time faculty, which was guaranteed to perpetuate that situation. The Guidelines were intended as a minimum program, but had the potential to become a maximum as well.

The more immediate problem seemed to be how to get the Guidelines followed. In terms of professional structure, real control over job entry through higher education is absolutely crucial. If we assume that some kind of full professionalism was an implicit goal of the SAA, the creation of the Guidelines was just the first step in the process of accrediting programs. Work towards that end began early in 1976 as the Guidelines were taking their final shape. The background remained a continued expansion of education programs. By 1980 the Education Directory would list forty-seven multi-course programs in thirty-two states and the District of Columbia, compared with seventeen such programs four years before. According to several participants, the major immediate forces behind the attempt to institute program accreditation were concerns over the unregulated proliferation of courses and the questionable archival qualifications of some instructors. Depending on which side of the fence you are on, this can be seen as either responsible professional leadership or as the typical protection of turf by an established cartel. It may have been a little bit of both. In reality, the Guidelines were so straightforward and so grounded in existing practice that most new programs, regardless of circumstances or instructor, were easily able to fulfill their requirements in terms of a course in theory and a practicum. I have not seen any claim that there was recurrent substantive abuse in the content or

¹⁶ Ruth W. Helmuth, “Education for American Archivists: A View From the Trenches,” *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 299.

structure of archival education, and the wide distribution of courses implies that they were responding to local needs. But it also became clear that beyond the introductory course and the practicum, there was no consensus. Many programs just stopped there, and others offered courses in areas like oral history or photography rather than the independent study prescribed in the Guidelines.

Work on accreditation quickly became enmeshed with other SAA education and training initiatives. Many groups comparable to the SAA—like the Association of Records Managers and Administrators and the Medical Library Association, for example—concentrate on individual certification through examination. Concerned that graduates of SAA-approved programs would have an advantage over other archivists, the Education Committee investigated individual certification of archivists through examination and grandfathering, as well as through education.¹⁷ The National Archives continued to emphasize post-appointment training, a position that was at least consistent with certification through examination.¹⁸ To further complicate matters, in 1976 the SAA received an NEH grant to conduct concentrated basic workshops around the country, a program that had the potential to compete with graduate education.¹⁹

In this context, the Committee on Education and Professional Development rapidly developed its proposals, based on drafts written by Trudy Peterson, for a Board of Archival Certification. The Board would administer or mandate three types of individual archival certification—through examination, experience (grandfathering), or completion of an accredited program. The proposals were discussed widely within the profession in 1977 and 1978. Finally, in the fall of 1978 the SAA Council made two decisions that seemed to set the Society firmly on the path to accreditation of graduate programs. Based on the recommendation of the Education Committee and perceived membership opposition, individual certification through grandfathering and examination was abandoned. Serious questions had been raised about the content and grading of the proposed test, and about the usefulness of a grandfather clause requiring only two years of professional experience. The Council also decided that the SAA should concentrate on advanced workshops in areas like business archives, photographs, conservation, and management, rather than on basic workshops.²⁰ That has remained the Society's commitment, and derives from the fact that there are few advanced courses anywhere on specific aspects of archival work. But it has meant that the Society's institutional

¹⁷ Society of American Archivists, "Archival Certification Draft Proposal," *SAA Newsletter* (July 1977): 10–11.

¹⁸ For further information, see Frank B. Evans, "Post-appointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," *American Archivist* 40 (January 1977): 57–74.

¹⁹ Information regarding these grants is available in "The Society of American Archivists" sections of the *American Archivist* during this period.

²⁰ Hugh A. Taylor, "The President's Page," *American Archivist* 42 (April 1979): 259–61.

interest has not been in the direction of graduate education. The new proposal for an archival institute through which the SAA would offer a long-term continuing education program seems to reinforce that basic divergent interest, as well as leaving open the possibility of more SAA involvement in basic education.

But back in 1978, with various distractions apparently removed, events began to move directly, if not swiftly, to a denouement. In October the SAA Council approved work on full implementation of an accreditation procedure.²¹ Yet between various drafts and meetings, it was not until September 1980 that Council approved the distribution of a self-study document prepared by Jerry Ham and Nancy Peace to universities around the country. Two or three responding programs were to be selected for pilot site visits in a careful procedure suggested by the Council on Post-Secondary Education. But by the spring of 1981 only thirteen usable replies had been received from the forty-two universities canvassed. By that time, a variety of legal and financial difficulties associated with accreditation had become apparent. Several poorly attended meetings of the Education Committee ensued, and Council rejected the Committee's suggestion for a meeting with ALA officials.²² In January 1982 the SAA Council accepted the report submitted by Committee co-chairs Trudy Peterson and Francis Blouin, recommending the suspension of all efforts in accreditation, though the Council does seem to have been somewhat surprised by the finality of the Committee's action.²³ Further, despite predictions that if one method failed the other would be pursued, the Committee and the Council both refused to reconsider the idea of certifying individuals and not programs.

How had this surprising result come about? I think the long delay between the Council's 1978 actions and the 1981 circulation of the self-study provides a vital clue, though the delay itself is not the explanation. The answer may be the "dog that did not bark." There was simply no significant pressure from anyone, anywhere to counter the various potential problems that inevitably loomed larger as accreditation approached. One problem that should have been obvious from the beginning was the difficulty of accrediting courses rather than degree programs, especially courses traditionally identified with individuals. What or whom are you accrediting, especially in the context of a university with fully accredited history or library science programs? More practically, as early as 1976 the Committee had been aware that accreditation would cost the Society and the universities a lot of money, implying an SAA dues increase.²⁴ Legal problems also loomed, as groups

²¹ Ann Morgan Campbell, ed. "The Society of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 41 (January 1978): 105–6.

²² Ann Morgan Campbell, ed. "The Society of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 238.

²³ Campbell, "The Society of American Archivists," 244.

²⁴ Information on the Society of American Archivist's financial situation is available in the "Council Minutes" in the *American Archivist*. Given the Society's financial standing during this period, any significant expenses would be detrimental to the organization.

like the American Association of Museums were sued by organizations to whom they had denied accreditation. Most people closely involved with the issue cite such concrete reasons in the decision to abandon accreditation.

Yet these reasons must be somewhat superficial, even if valid. Many other professional and semi-professional groups have certification procedures, ranging from librarians with their full master's degree to records managers—our prosperous offspring—with their examination. What became clear between 1978 and 1981 was that there was no impulse among archivists strong enough to overcome the problems inherent in accreditation. Several factors come into play. Once again, economics was perhaps paramount. Major employers—from NARS and the Library of Congress to state and major historical societies—showed a continuing indifference to accredited archival education. Universities had no money to spend on accreditation visits, especially for non-degree programs. With the recession, a group of potential employees was in no position to impose conditions on employers, who had the pick of applicants. There was also a variety of developments within the archival profession. Through the operation of the job market, and without anyone mandating it, the master's degree in history, librarianship, or the specialty of the individual's shop, became virtually required for employment. The 1982 SAA salary survey revealed that 88 percent of archivists in their thirties held a masters degree.²⁵ The archival education system, vocational and chaotic though it might have seemed, had also taken root and was prospering. It is important to remember that the Guidelines were essentially incorporated into most of these programs, thus achieving their main intellectual objective. Ironically, it then became questionable as to who really needed to have their programs accredited. Clearly, prominent, large programs like those at Wayne State, Wisconsin, or Case Western could attract and place students without guidelines or accreditation. At the other extreme, a small, new program like mine at Temple (perhaps one of the feared examples of proliferation and under-qualified teachers) could also flourish without official sanction. In my situation, I have found that many students have some job experience and only want a theory course, while even those who do add that practicum have been able to secure employment without the third SAA component—independent work—though Temple does offer it and it has been helpful to some. It is apparent, in Philadelphia at least, that the three-part program deviates somewhat from the requirements of students and employers.

Regardless of curriculum, a total of 82 percent of archivists in the 1982 survey had taken either a course or a workshop.²⁶ Yet the profession was not united on the need for accrediting education. My impression is that the membership was basically uninvolved and uninterested, while the SAA Council and the Education Committee were not always working together with the same set of

²⁵ David Bearman, "1982 Survey of the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* (Spring 1983): 234.

²⁶ Bearman, "1982 Survey," 236.

priorities. The former was more involved with post-appointment training and continuing education through advanced workshops, despite the peculiarity of establishing an advanced continuing education program without an agreed basic program preceding it—a problem which the proposed archives institute continues. In the end, the Society lacked the will as well as the resources to accredit graduate programs. The Education Committee and others cited a reaction during the 1970s against credentials and elitism, but the establishment of a professional education system implies those characteristics, even a certain amount of aggressive ruthlessness. The SAA felt no need to put out that kind of effort. As Philip Mason, who had chaired the Education Committee in 1980, wrote the following year, “If we are to adopt effective accreditation systems in the twentieth century, we must give higher priority to them.”²⁷

Of course the other way to look at it is to simply say, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Specifically, what existing problems were to be remedied by accrediting the proposed three-part program? We have seen that the Guidelines could be adapted without accreditation, and students can examine the education directory and compare them to specific course offerings. Nor does there seem to be much of a monetary argument for accreditation. Our average salaries in 1982—around \$22,000—were virtually the same as those of medical librarians, a specialized group requiring a master’s degree, an examination, two years experience, and periodic re-certification through continuing education.²⁸ In this regard, I would suggest that the gradually increasing feminization of our profession might do more to keep salaries down than any educational system could do to raise them. A fascinating aspect of the SAA salary survey was the finding that the average salary of a person with a masters of arts and sciences alone was considerably higher than that of both a person with an M.L.S. alone and the person with both an M.L.S. and the M.A. Probably the fact that the M.L.S. is a fully accredited professional degree has less impact than the fact that most people who have it are women. The point is that elaborate accreditation procedures can do little to change fundamental social patterns and prejudices. Another example is the federal government’s attempt to downgrade archival classifications. It is doubtful whether our three-course program could prevent the actions of a committed conservative administration when a long tradition of graduate degrees in history failed to dissuade.

So we find ourselves in the early 1980s in an anomalous situation, eloquently outlined in the most recent SAA education directory. As in 1973, the directory lists programs that it points out are not approved or endorsed. It asserts, without citing evidence, that most entry-level positions now require a graduate degree that includes a practicum. The directory notes that single courses “are not sufficient in themselves as preparation for a career in the

²⁷ Mason, “Archives in the Seventies,” 204.

²⁸ Bearman, “1982 Survey,” 238–239.

administration of archives,” implying that the 140-hour practicum makes the vital difference. And while continuing to avoid the old library school-versus-history program controversy, the directory does state that “training in research methods and experience in conducting original research is essential if the archivist is to fully discharge his or her professional responsibilities.”²⁹ That sounds suspiciously like a graduate history program, and distinctly unlike library school, bringing us back to the earliest controversies about the fundamental identity of archivists. The new Task Force on “What is an Archivist” speaks volumes on that point.³⁰

We have, therefore, not solved our most basic problem of definition, and I do not think trying to get people to take a double master’s is a practical solution. Archival educators in the United States have instead evolved a modest program that continues to successfully meet minimal needs. It is a program that seems not to need an elaborate accreditation procedure. But we still lack a whole range of institutional, intellectual, professional, and economic supports that would enable us to proceed further. We still need something—and not just “what you’ll do from nine to five”—to teach about, and someone who cares that we know it. The experience of the Canadian Master’s in Archives at British Columbia—begun just as the SAA abandoned accreditation—may suggest a new approach, as may the proposed American Archives Institute. I would certainly be skeptical of efforts to pick up where we left off in 1981. For let us remember the end of the story of Sisyphus, now back at the bottom of his mountain. Noting that “one always finds one’s burdens again,” Camus concludes that “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. Therein lies the danger—the temptation to retrieve our rock and start contentedly back up the mountain.” To avoid the fate of Sisyphus, we may need a different rock; we may even need a different mountain. We certainly ought to think about it.

²⁹ For further information, see the Society of American Archivists, *SAA Education Directory: 1973*. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1973).

³⁰ Miller paraphrased the official name of the task force, the Study Group on the Definition of an Archivist. In recent correspondence, Naomi Miller cited notes among Fredric Miller’s papers that reinforce his euphemistic renaming of this body within the context of the original presentation. Naomi Miller, letter to Elizabeth Yakel, 19 February 2000. Additional information on this period is available in the following sources: Society of American Archivists, “Task Force on Archives and Society,” *SAA Newsletter* (November 1983): 2; Society of American Archivists, “Study Group on the Definition of an Archivist,” *SAA Newsletter* (January 1984): 4–5; David B. Gracy, “Archives and Society: The First Archival Revolution,” *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 7–10; and David B. Gracy, “Our Future is Now,” *American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985): 12–21.