

Building a Baseline of Archival Data with A*CENSUS II

Jennifer Gunter King and Beth Myers

The Society of American Archivists (SAA), North America's oldest and largest national professional archives association, has dramatically strengthened its infrastructure for research and innovation in the last few decades, believing, as former SAA Executive Director Nancy Beaumont explained, "that practice, education, and research informs the other. Each can—and should—improve the other, each is critically important to a profession's growth and development."¹ Today, SAA offers archivists the profession's leading journal, foundational books on archival theory and practice, funding for research projects, an annual forum to showcase research and innovation, an annual meeting in virtual and in-person formats, data services, training and education, readily available facts and figures, and, of most importance for this special section in the journal, seminal landmark surveys. SAA's infrastructure and the services that it provides advance the research and practice of both academic scholars and archival practitioners.

Key to understanding the archives profession is knowing the research at its core. SAA's recent efforts demonstrates increased interest in research-based practice. The SAA Foundation, the nation's leading source of nonprofit funding dedicated to the interests of archives and archivists, offers funds that directly support research and reporting about the profession, its practice, and its practitioners. Archivists and archival scholars conduct a multitude of research activities, with results and data that subsequently appear in many outlets, including *American Archivist*. Archival research is also advanced through the SAA Research Forum, established in 2007, which offers members engaged in innovative practice and research a platform to present their work in conjunction with the SAA Annual Meeting.

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The SAA Committee on Research, Data, and Assessment (CORDA) was formed in 2019 to provide access to significant and useful data and research about SAA, American archives, and their users that evidence the value of archives for society and help us improve our services to SAA members and our patrons. CORDA oversees several components that support research, including the [SAA Dataverse](#),² a [Facts and Figures site](#),³ and education and training. CORDA is also developing a [Research and Innovation Roadmap](#)⁴ to frame the many research activities undertaken or needed in the archival field. SAA's infrastructure for supporting research and innovation has unfolded in tandem with an unprecedented growth and prominence of academically-based scholarship in the last two decades, as detailed in the 2016 [Research in the Archival Multiverse](#). Galvanized and harmonized by collaborative efforts like the Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI), this alignment between scholars and practitioners should be a continued goal.

As part of a broader adoption of research-based practice, landmark studies such as A*CENSUS and A*CENSUS II form a touchstone basis for our work. A*CENSUS II, conducted in 2021 and 2022 and funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), is the only national survey of individual archivists and memory workers in the United States that has been fielded in the past seventeen years. The first A*CENSUS—Archival Census and Education Needs Survey in the United States, funded by the IMLS Librarians for the 21st Century program—in 2004 was “the first broadscale survey of individual archivists in the United States in nearly thirty years,” yielding responses from 5,620 archivists. A*CENSUS I and II (both of which are available for use through the SAA Dataverse) followed the 1985 Census of Archival Institutions, overseen by SAA's Task Force on Institutional Evaluation and which yielded 549 responses to a mailed sixteen-page survey. Another landmark study includes the recent [REPO project](#),⁵ which aims to identify, gather, standardize, and make publicly accessible location data for archival repositories in the United States. Simply put, A*CENSUS is an ambitious project which provides critical datasets that inform the educational, scholarly, and professional work of all archivists.

The genesis of A*CENSUS II began long before the funding was available to support the project. In the intervening years between A*CENSUS I and A*CENSUS II, numerous surveys were conducted by individuals, working groups, industry think tanks, individual researchers, and information science scholars attempting to capture the state of archival professionals. These surveys provide important insights into salaries, student loan debt, term employment, work-life balance, gender, race, and other factors that define the experience of American archivists. These surveys filled in some of the informational gaps left open or outdated since A*CENSUS I. This collective data became a tool for individuals to advocate for themselves and for changes in their working environment and in SAA. In doing so, they called into stark relief broader issues of inequality and equity, racism, and sexism within the

profession. Yet the scale of these surveys blunted the transformational reach of their results. In other words, decisions and arguments *could* be data driven, but the data was inherently limited based on scale and therefore the impact more diffused.

A*CENSUS II was based on A*CENSUS I, but it also departed from the first survey by adding new areas of inquiry. At a minimum, it was to replicate, if not expand on, the national scale of the first iteration. SAA leadership, spearheaded by then-Executive Director Nancy Beaumont and then-President Meredith Evans, among others, brought enthusiasm and intellectual framing to A*CENSUS II. As articulated in a multiauthored grant application to IMLS, the bold vision for A*CENSUS II was to create:

A comprehensive, two-part survey of U.S. archivists and archival institutions. SAA will survey 1) every self-identified archivist/archives worker in the U.S. to gather information about their demographics, educational background and needs, job placement and status, and salaries, as well as their perspectives on key issues in the field, and 2) the directors of archival organizations to gather data about institutional characteristics; resources; strategic directions; and diversity, equity, inclusion, and access issues. Data and analyses will be made publicly available to support research and use by archivists and archives workers, archival institutions, and members of other cultural heritage communities.

As such, A*CENSUS II was planned to be structurally different from the first iteration. It was also given a moral and ethical compass, rooted in the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA).⁶ The larger ideological framing was more often implied than explicit, but A*CENSUS II was intended to tell archivists and memory workers about themselves and enable practitioners to speak to those outside the profession about our work and needs. If A*CENSUS I was a snapshot of the profession in 2004, A*CENSUS II is a more complex composite picture of professional life almost twenty years later.

The thirty-one-month timeline, outlined by the IMLS grant, established a project plan and structure. In recognition of the highly skilled labor required to execute a national survey of all archivists and memory workers, SAA partnered with the research firm Ithaka S&R. Ithaka S&R, embodied by the indomitable Makala Skinner, held primary responsibility to develop the survey tools, implement the survey, and analyze the results. SAA, through Council and executive directorship, named a ten-person working group that represented most sectors of archival practice. The working group had a project lead team and met regularly over the course of two years. Early work focused on what A*CENSUS I accomplished and what needed to be updated, added, or left behind. A fully collaborative process, the working group helped produce both the All Archivists Survey and the Archives Administrators Survey tools. The surveys were vetted, tested, and improved. Contact lists were generated by SAA, the A*CENSUS II Working Group, regional and state archival organizations, and personal and professional networks. The surveys were promoted via social media and through SAA and Ithaka S&R websites. Every effort was made to reach as many archivists and memory workers in the United States as possible. In

2021, the All Archivists Survey secured 5,699 valid, complete responses. In 2022, the Archives Administrators Survey garnered 746 responses. Neither survey is perfect. Instead, each survey is a step forward in creating a baseline of data that can be built on in future—and ideally more frequent—iterations of A*CENSUS.

The *American Archivist* Editorial Board, led by Editor Amy Cooper Cary, has prioritized space in the journal to present the high-level findings of A*CENSUS II. Part I, the All Archivists Survey Report, is published in this issue. Part II, the Archives Administrators Report, will be published in the Fall/Winter 2023 issue. Articles and commentary using these reports are invited for publication beginning in the Spring/Summer 2024 issue. The Editorial Board's goals are to provide access to the surveys' data in SAA's journal of record and invite all members to evaluate and engage in writing from the data. The Board is committed to supporting ongoing profession-wide research and analysis in *American Archivist* and is grateful to the A*CENSUS II Working Group for bringing this information forward and to CODA for making that data available through the SAA Dataverse.

While the impact of A*CENSUS II will be lasting, the effort is also a call to increase the regularity with which these datasets are updated and will require sustained leadership to that end. A*CENSUS II establishes foundational data that, continually updated, will allow the profession to understand and chart change, impact, and need over time. This knowledge can only strengthen our ability to understand our professional landscape and enable substantive advocacy by and for archivists. Coupled with the enhanced infrastructure afforded by CODA, SAA continues to center the foundational concept that practice, education, and research improve the other and are each critically important to the archival profession's growth and development. A*CENSUS II, and the strengthened infrastructure in place, offers archivists an invitation to reflect on the value of research-based practice. We also reflect on the importance of advancing research that will inform and shape archival practice through our participation in research efforts like this landmark study.

NOTES

- ¹ Nancy Beaumont, "Introduction to Research and Innovation at SAA," Society of American Archivists 2021 Annual Meeting, Research and Innovation, July 14, 2021, https://www.pathlms.com/saa/events/2635/video_presentations/205690.
- ² The SAA Dataverse is available at <https://www2.archivists.org/saa-dataverse>. Read about its policies and procedures at <https://dataverse.unc.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.15139/S3/X4ZO8P>.
- ³ See "Facts and Figures," SAA Dataverse, <https://www2.archivists.org/facts-and-figures>.
- ⁴ See "SAA Research and Innovation Roadmap Beta Version 1.0," SAA's Committee on Research, Data, and Assessment, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/committee-on-research-data-and-assessment/saa-research-and-innovation-roadmap-beta-version-10>.
- ⁵ See RepoData, <https://repositorydata.wordpress.com>.
- ⁶ SAA's Strategic Plan for 2023–2025 includes DEIA as one of its primary activities. See <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2022/saa-council-approves-strategic-plan-for-fy-2023-2025>, captured at <https://perma.cc/5LJT-U7XD>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jennifer Gunter King is the director of the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University. She previously served as director of the Harold F. Johnson Library at Hampshire College from 2012 to 2018 and as director of Archives and Special Collections at Mount Holyoke College from 2004 to 2012. An inaugural co-chair of the Society of American Archivists Committee on Research, Data, and Assessment (CORDA) and co-chair of the SAA Research Forum, King holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and a master of art in history and a master of library science from the University of Maryland.



Beth Myers holds an MA and PhD from Loyola University Chicago in twentieth-century US history, with concentrations in women's history, gender theory, and public history. Myers joined Smith College in 2014 as director of Special Collections and previously held positions at the Women and Leadership Archives in Chicago and the Walter Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs in Detroit. She is currently serving as a member and vice president of the Society of American Archivists Foundation Board and is concluding service as chair of the A*CENSUS II Working Group. Her current research interest is social memory and mourning culture as an extension of archival work.