

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
August 22, 2011  
Chicago, Illinois**

**Action Item: Form Task Force to Study Issues  
Related to the SAA Annual Meeting  
(Prepared by: Kate Theimer)**

**BACKGROUND**

In recent years many aspects of the SAA Annual Meeting have changed. For example, there are more attendees, more roundtables which need to meet, more ancillary activities (such as the Research Forum and lunchtime meetings), and more people wanting to propose sessions. Every year there seem to be more options available to attendees, but the basic structure and principles governing the way meetings are planned have undergone little change. Similarly, over the past few years emerging technologies and companies utilizing them have presented new ways to make meeting content accessible to people who can't attend in person. And every year more people attending the annual meeting come with expectations and experiences based on other conference models and types of sessions.

Yet within this evolving environment, the SAA Annual Meeting appears to be something that is difficult to change. Nonetheless, many members have expressed a desire to change some aspects of the meeting. While it is true that there will never be complete harmony in any group regarding something as complex as the selection of the annual meeting site, schedule, negotiated hotel contracts, registration costs, and other issues, it appears to many as though matters have reached a point when long-standing assumptions regarding the meeting need to be reassessed and when new issues confronting the Society need to be examined.

In addition to anecdotal evidence that many Council members may be able to relate, there have been conversations, some with extensive comments, on several archival blogs. These include:

- <http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=2137>
- <http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=1042>
- <http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=1455>
- <http://terryx.wordpress.com/2011/06/22/get-in-the-pit/>
- <http://derangementanddescription.wordpress.com/2010/08/16/post-saa-howl/> (in particular the comments on this post)

Issues identified as needing examination include:

- “Social responsibility” and the selection of conference sites and venues
- Existing meeting model, which limits our choice of conference venues, as well as the meeting activities, structure, and schedule
- Possibilities for meeting in smaller cities, achieving more diversity in conference sites
- Rising cost of the meeting, both for members and to SAA
- Need to make meeting content more accessible to those who can’t attend
- The extent of SAA’s dependence on the annual meeting for budget revenue

There are several factors that support consideration of these issues at this time. First, the recent concerns raised by members about SAA’s decisions regarding holding the meeting at the Hyatt hotel despite a union boycott have raised questions about what the Society’s policies and responses should be regarding “social responsibility” issues and the meeting. Second, as demonstrated by the blog conversations cited above, the adoption of social media tools for communication have allowed members to more widely share their opinions with each other, leading to more focus on their concerns. Third, there have been changes in how many professional associations structure their meetings and make meeting content available, including “un-conference” models and virtual conferencing, and members are eager to have these options available from SAA. Fourth, the impact of the economy has made many members anxious to see lower costs for attending the meeting, particularly lower costs for conference hotel accommodations.

Another important motivation in trying to make the annual meeting more accessible to all members is the goal of increasing the diversity of participation in SAA. If SAA is truly committed to increasing the diversity of voices heard in the profession, an important step would be to try to make sure that not only the membership of the organization is diverse, but that as many of those voices as possible can be heard in the sections, roundtables, committees, and in sessions. If you can’t attend the annual meeting it is difficult to be an active participant in the organization.

## **DISCUSSION**

The scope of the issues is daunting. The approach recommended below is to appoint one task force with the charge of gathering information and making recommendations on this broad array of topics. Four subgroups would be tasked with gathering information on specific topics and submitting reports to the task force, thus dividing up and delegating some of the work. The charge given to this task force is a difficult one: to review many, and at times, somewhat competing factors affecting how SAA carries out its annual meeting, and produce one set of recommendations for what changes should be made.

Given this complexity, some might argue that a better approach would be to separate the topics and address them one by one rather than as a group. This approach might allow for easier “quick wins,” but would entail its own problems. If these problems were tackled separately by smaller groups it would require participation from a larger number of dedicated member volunteers, and presumably a longer time line. In addition, the

recommendations of each group would still need to be weighed against the recommendations of the others. For example, if the social responsibility group recommends certain parameters for selecting meeting hotels but those parameters result in higher overall costs, how should those factors be ranked against recommendations from another group that recommend keeping meeting costs as low as possible for members? Or alternatively, if the recommendations of the social responsibility group narrow the field of venue choices, how should that be weighed against recommendations about what type of venue is most desirable for the meeting when selecting a meeting site? Without information about changing the current meeting model, how can possibilities for meeting in a wider range of cities be usefully explored? Exploring these issues separately would require a careful sequencing of assignments, involving more people over a longer overall period of time.

Another possible approach is to only choose one or two topics to explore, and accept the status quo for the others. The recent high attendance numbers at annual meetings might suggest that although some members are dissatisfied with the meetings, enough are sufficiently satisfied that they keep attending. Such an approach would entail less risk but would also deliver fewer results. No matter which issues were selected, there would be members who would feel their needs had not been considered. For example if meeting cost, site selection and virtual meeting components are not addressed, then the people who are currently unable to attend or benefit from the annual meeting as often as they would like would still, presumably, be dissatisfied. Moreover, as discussed previously, the goal for forming the recommended task force is not just to address possible areas for improvement, but also to capitalize on new opportunities.

Of course, even with the course of action in the Recommendation, some members will no doubt be dissatisfied with the results. There are no guarantees that the task force will recommend any particular set of changes, and there will no doubt be some who will be disappointed that the recommendations are not more sweeping no matter what they are. However, a key factor is that alternatives will have been identified and discussed in an open manner. The task force's charge includes a requirement to consult with the membership and to consider member responses to a draft report. Transparency will be important for this task force to ensure that members are confident that new approaches have indeed been considered, even if those approaches are not included in the recommendations.

One of the task force's major challenges will be sequencing its activities with the anticipated survey of the SAA membership, currently being planned by the Diversity and Membership Committees. The opportunity to add questions to this survey and gather opinions directly from the membership about the annual meeting is central to the activity of the task force. (At this time, no projected schedule for this survey is available and so it is difficult to project forward a timeline for the delivery of the task force's interim and final reports.)

Another key factor to the task force's success will be operating in an open and transparent manner. Collecting information from the membership, including soliciting

feedback on draft reports, will be central. But in addition to taking information in regarding its activities, the progress of the task force should also regularly be reported out to members. One such approach would be to make the reports of the subgroups (social responsibility, meeting model, meeting content, and online accessibility of meeting content) available for member comment as interim products.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

**THAT an Annual Meeting Task Force be appointed, with the following purpose, description, and timeline:**

**Annual Meeting Task Force**

**I. Purpose**

The Annual Meeting Task Force is charged with analyzing current practices related to the SAA Annual Meeting as well as possible future approaches, and delivering to the Council a report with recommendations as to which current practices should be changed and what new practices should be implemented. The task force will consider how issues of social responsibility should be addressed; how meeting sites, including hotels, are selected; the current meeting model and meeting structure; increasing diversity in meeting sites; how to limit cost of meeting attendance for participants; how to best make meeting content available to those who cannot attend; and the extent of SAA's dependence on the annual meeting for budget revenue, as well as any other issues they deem appropriate.

**II. Task Force Selection, Size, and Length of Term**

The SAA Vice President shall appoint five members, of varying lengths of membership in SAA, with expertise in the topics defined in the Purpose statement. One of those members shall serve as the chair. In addition, the SAA Vice President shall also appoint members with appropriate expertise to serve on four subgroups (described in Section IV), each consisting of between four and six members. One member of each subgroup shall serve as its chair and shall also serve as a member of the task force, bringing the total membership of the task force to nine people. All appointments are effective from September 1, 2011, through September 1, 2013.

**III. Reporting Procedures**

The task force will provide regular updates prior to each Council meeting. Ideally, a preliminary report and recommendations would be delivered to the Council by its Spring 2012 meeting, allowing for distribution to the membership for comment no later than the 2012 Annual Meeting. This would allow for a final report and recommendations to be delivered to the Council for consideration no later than the Spring 2013 meeting. However, given the required coordination with a survey to be developed and distributed by the Membership and Diversity Committees, the task force should advise the Council as early as possible what schedule it recommends after consultation with those groups. Any revised schedule must include distribution of a draft set of recommendations to the membership with an open call for comments and sufficient time to address the comments received.

#### **IV. Duties and Responsibilities**

To assist in the gathering and analysis of the information necessary to support the broad mission of the task force, its work shall be supported by four subgroups. Each subgroup is tasked with gathering information on a specific topic and submitting a report to the task force. These subgroup reports will be used to support and inform the task force's final report. In addition, as described in Section II, the chairs of each subgroup will serve as full task force members. The four subgroups will be:

##### **A. Social Responsibility**

**Assignment:** Identify what “social responsibility” issues have a possible impact on the annual meeting, for example, issues related to discrimination, harassment, or labor practices. Determine possible approaches to considering hotel relationships with their labor force before signing contracts and explore the feasibility of including “out clauses” if labor practice, discrimination or other issues arise. Also examine if there are other considerations regarding the meeting that could be affected, for example calls for boycotts of meetings in specific states or cities because of local or state laws or policies. Examine what steps SAA can take if a situation arises, with consideration for what information should be conveyed to the membership and in what fashion.

**Outcome:** Deliver to the task force a report defining what social responsibility issues SAA should consider in making a site selection, what steps SAA can and should take to avoid conflict with SAA principles, proposing policies about how and when SAA should communicate information to membership, and other relevant recommendations for the task force to consider.

##### **B. Meeting Model**

**Assignment:** Review rationale for current meeting model (i.e. conference events take place at one hotel) and consider alternative models that might meet SAA's needs, for example having meeting events split across two or more hotels or utilizing convention or university facilities.

**Outcome:** Deliver to the task force a report outlining the pros and cons, including costs to SAA and members, of possible meeting models and, if possible, recommend one or more models for future consideration.

##### **C. Meeting Content**

**Assignment:** Review current format, schedule and type of content of the annual meeting, including issues such as timing of section and roundtable meetings, number, content and scheduling of plenary sessions, number and format of sessions, opportunities for informal networking, timing of workshop sessions, and total length of the meeting. Consider value of introducing new kinds of content, such as lightning talks and un-conference elements. Discuss what rules regarding meeting structure and content should be continued from year to year. Examine issues regarding call for meeting sessions and possibility of extending the deadline for proposals.

**Outcome:** Deliver to the task force a report identifying which aspects of the current meeting structure should be continued and which should be changed, what kinds of new content

should be considered, and any recommendations for changes in the way annual meeting program committees function.

#### **D. Online Accessibility of Meeting Content**

**Assignment:** Research how other professional organizations provide online access to meeting content, including virtual conference and other models. Consider opportunities for increasing accessibility of content from previous meetings, including audio recordings and presentations. Review the business models and costs (to SAA and members) of using a vendor to provide services and explore what options could be provided using volunteers.

**Outcome:** Deliver to the task force a report describing the options available for delivering meeting content online, either contemporaneously with the meeting or following it, and for making better use of available materials. The report should include an assessment of costs associated with various options and, if possible, a recommendation for which options should be pursued.

#### **V. The Work of the Whole Task Force**

In addition to reviewing and incorporating the reports of the subgroups, the entire task force is charged with exploring and considering:

- Possibilities for meeting in smaller cities and achieving more diversity in conference sites
- Rising cost of the meeting, both for members and to SAA
- The extent of SAA's dependence on the annual meeting for budget revenue

#### **VI. Coordination with Planned Membership Survey**

The task force will coordinate with the Membership and Diversity Committees, which have a planned survey for the membership. Ideally as part of that survey, this group should collect information from the membership to assess issues such as how much they value various aspects of the meeting, how the economy has affected their ability to attend the meeting, and how they would view key trade-offs.

#### **VII. Consultation with Members, Other Organizations, and External Experts**

An important element of the task force's work will be soliciting broad input on the meeting in general, in addition to collecting structured data via a survey. The group, in coordination with SAA staff, should collect information about how other comparable organizations have handled similar issues. The task force may also want to consult with outside professionals, such as people with expertise in meeting planning.

#### **VIII. Meetings**

The task force meets via conference call as needed to develop work plans, ensure coordination of efforts by various groups and individuals, and ensure compliance with established timelines. In addition, the task force may have one in-person meeting prior to delivering its draft report, one at the 2012 Annual Meeting, and another in-person meeting in 2013 before delivering the final report.

**Support Statement:** Establishing a task force to study issues related to the annual meeting will address member concerns about a wide range of topics and demonstrate SAA's commitment to exploring new opportunities and expanding opportunities for member participation.

**Fiscal Impact:** There are no anticipated costs required to support this task force other than two meetings (the third meeting, to take place in conjunction with the SAA annual meeting, would not be funded). The cost of one meeting in Chicago for nine people is estimated to be, at most, \$9,500. However it may be possible to find ways to lower that cost. Presumably these two meetings would take place in different fiscal years, one in FY12 and one in FY13, however that would need to be confirmed by the task force once they are able to determine their schedule.