

# SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics

## Introduction

Statements of ethics emerge from the core values of a profession. The [Core Values of Archivists](#) and the [Code of Ethics for Archivists](#) are intended to be used together to guide archivists, as well as to inform those who work with archivists, in shaping expectations for professional engagement. The former is a statement of what archivists believe; the latter is a framework for archivists' behavior.

In addition, [case studies](#) drawn from real life 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).

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## Core Values of Archivists

*(Approved by the SAA Council in May 2011.)*

### PURPOSE

Archivists select, preserve, and make available primary sources that document the activities of institutions, communities, and individuals. These archival sources can be used for many purposes, including providing legal and administrative evidence, protecting the rights of individuals and organizations, and forming part of the cultural heritage of society. The modern archives profession bases its theoretical foundations and functions on a set of core values that define and guide the practices and activities of archivists, both individually and collectively. Values embody what a profession stands for and should form the basis for the behavior of its members.

Archivists provide important benefits and services, such as: identifying and preserving essential parts of the cultural heritage of society; organizing and maintaining the documentary record of institutions, groups, and individuals; assisting in the process of remembering the past through authentic and reliable primary sources; and serving a broad range of people who seek to locate and use valuable evidence and information. Since ancient times, archives have afforded a fundamental power to those who control them. In a democratic society such power should benefit all members of the community. The values shared and embraced by archivists enable them to meet these obligations and to provide vital services on behalf of all groups and individuals in society.

This statement of core archival values articulates these central principles both to remind archivists why they engage in their professional responsibilities and to inform others of the basis for archivists' contributions to society. Archivists are often subjected to competing claims and imperatives, and in certain situations particular values may pull in opposite directions. This statement intends to provide guidance by identifying the core values that

guide archivists in making such decisions and choices. Core values provide part of the context in which to examine ethical concerns.

## **CORE VALUES OF ARCHIVISTS**

**Access and Use:** Archivists promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of materials, consistent with any mandatory access restrictions, such as public statute, donor contract, business/institutional privacy, or personal privacy. Although access may be limited in some instances, archivists seek to promote open access and use when possible. Access to records is essential in personal, academic, business, and government settings, and use of records should be both welcomed and actively promoted. Even individuals who do not directly use archival materials benefit indirectly from research, public programs, and other forms of archival use, including the symbolic value of knowing that such records exist and can be accessed when needed.

**Accountability:** By documenting institutional functions, activities, and decision-making, archivists provide an important means of ensuring accountability. In a republic such accountability and transparency constitute an essential hallmark of democracy. Public 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. Access to the records of public officials and agencies provides a means of holding them accountable both to public citizens and to the judgment of future generations. In the private sector, accountability through archival documentation assists in protecting the rights and interests of consumers, shareholders, employees, and citizens. Archivists in collecting repositories may not in all cases share the same level of responsibility for accountability, but they, too, maintain evidence of the actions of individuals, groups, and organizations which may be required to provide accountability for contemporary and future interests.

**Advocacy:** Archivists promote the use and understanding of the historical record. They serve as advocates for their own archival programs and institutional needs. They also advocate for the application of archival values in a variety of settings, including, to the extent consistent with their institutional responsibilities, the political arena. Archivists seek to contribute to the formation of public policy related to archival and recordkeeping concerns and to ensure that their expertise is used in the public interest.

**Diversity:** Archivists collectively seek to document and preserve the record of the broadest possible range of individuals, socio-economic groups, governance, and corporate entities in society. Archivists embrace the importance of identifying, preserving, and working with communities to actively document those whose voices have been overlooked or marginalized. They seek to build connections to under-documented communities to support: acquisition and preservation of sources relating to these communities' activities, encouragement of community members' use of archival research sources, and/or formation of community-based archives. Archivists accept and encourage a diversity of viewpoints on social, political, and intellectual issues, as represented both in archival records and among members of the profession. They work actively to achieve a diversified and representative membership in the profession.

**History and Memory:** Archivists recognize that primary sources enable people to examine the past and thereby gain insights into the human experience. Archival materials provide surrogates for human memory, both individually and collectively and, when properly maintained, they serve as evidence against which individual and social memory can be tested.

Archivists preserve such primary sources to enable us to better comprehend the past, understand the present, and prepare for the future.

**Preservation:** Archivists preserve a wide variety of primary sources for the benefit of future generations. Preserving materials is a means to this end, not an end in itself. Within prescribed law and best-practice standards, archivists may determine that the original documents themselves must be preserved, while at other times copying the information they contain to alternate media may be sufficient. Archivists thus preserve materials for the benefit of the future more than for the concerns of the past.

**Professionalism:** Archivists adhere to a common set of missions, values, and ethics. They accept an evolving theoretical base of knowledge, collaborate with colleagues in related professions, develop and follow professional standards, strive for excellence in their daily practice, and recognize the importance of professional education, including lifelong learning. They encourage professional development among their co-workers, foster the aspirations of those entering the archives profession, and actively share their knowledge and expertise. Archivists seek to expand opportunities to cooperate with other information professionals, with records creators, and with users and potential users of the archival record.

**Responsible Custody:** Archivists ensure proper custody for the documents and records entrusted to them. As responsible stewards, archivists are committed to making reasonable and defensible choices for the holdings of their institutions. They strive to balance the sometimes competing interests of various stakeholders. Archivists are judicious stewards who manage records by following best practices in developing facilities service standards, collection development policies, user service benchmarks, and other performance metrics. They collaborate with external partners for the benefit of users and public needs. In certain situations, archivists recognize the need to deaccession materials so that resources can be strategically applied to the most essential or useful materials.

**Selection:** Archivists make choices about which materials to select for preservation based on a wide range of criteria, including the needs of potential users. Understanding that because of the cost of long-term retention and the challenges of accessibility most of the documents and records created in modern society cannot be kept, archivists recognize the wisdom of seeking advice of other stakeholders in making such selections. They acknowledge and accept the responsibility of serving as active agents in shaping and interpreting the documentation of the past.

**Service:** Within the mandates and missions of their institutions, archivists provide effective and efficient connections to (and mediation for) primary sources so that users, whoever they may be, can discover and benefit from the archival record of society, its institutions, and individuals. Archivists serve numerous constituencies and stakeholders, which may include institutional administrators, creators and donors of documentary materials, rights holders, un/documented peoples, researchers using the archives for many distinct purposes, corporate and governmental interests, and/or citizens concerned with the information and evidence held in archival sources. Archivists seek to meet the needs of users as quickly, effectively, and efficiently as possible.

**Social Responsibility:** Underlying all the professional activities of archivists is their responsibility to a variety of groups in society and to the public good. Most immediately, archivists serve the needs and interests of their employers and institutions. Yet the archival record is part of the cultural heritage of all members of society. Archivists with a clearly defined societal mission strive to meet these broader social responsibilities in their policies

and procedures for selection, preservation, access, and use of the archival record. Archivists with a narrower mandate still contribute to individual and community memory for their specific constituencies, and in so doing improve the overall knowledge and appreciation of the past within society.

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## **Code of Ethics for Archivists**

*(Approved by the SAA Council in February 2005; revised, January 2012.)*

Archives are created by a wide array of groups and provide evidence of the full range of human experience. Archivists endeavor to ensure that those materials entrusted to their care will be accessible over time as evidence of human activity and social organization. Archivists 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 the complex situations and issues that can arise in the course of their work.

The Society of American Archivists is a membership organization comprising individuals and organizations dedicated to the selection, care, preservation, 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 increase awareness of ethical concerns among archivists, their colleagues, and the rest of society. As advocates for documentary collections and cultural objects 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 should serve as aspirational principles for archivists to consider as they strive to create trusted archival institutions.

### **Professional Relationships**

Archivists cooperate and collaborate with other archivists, and respect them and their institutions' missions and collecting policies. In their professional relationships with donors, records creators, users, and colleagues, archivists are honest, fair, collegial, and equitable.

### **Judgment**

Archivists exercise professional judgment in appraising, acquiring, and processing materials to ensure the preservation, authenticity, diversity, and lasting cultural and historical value of their collections. Archivists should carefully document their collections-related decisions and activities to make their role in the selection, retention, or creation of the historical record transparent to their institutions, donors, and users. Archivists are encouraged to consult with colleagues, relevant professionals, and communities of interest to ensure that diverse perspectives inform their actions and decisions.

### **Authenticity**

Archivists ensure the authenticity and continuing usability of records in their care. They document and protect the unique archival characteristics of records and strive to protect the records' intellectual and physical integrity from tampering or corruption. Archivists may not willfully alter, manipulate, or destroy data or records to conceal facts or distort evidence.

They thoroughly document any actions that may cause changes to the records in their care or raise questions about the records' authenticity.

### **Security and Protection**

Archivists protect all documentary materials for which they are responsible. They take steps to minimize the natural physical deterioration of records and implement specific security policies to protect digital records. Archivists guard all records against accidental damage, vandalism, and theft and have well-formulated plans in place to respond to any disasters that may threaten records. Archivists cooperate actively with colleagues and law enforcement agencies to apprehend and prosecute vandals and thieves.

### **Access and Use**

Recognizing that use is the fundamental reason for keeping archives, archivists actively promote open and equitable access to the records in their care within the context of their institutions' missions and their intended user groups. They minimize restrictions and maximize ease of access. They facilitate the continuing accessibility and intelligibility of archival materials in all formats. Archivists formulate and disseminate institutional access policies along with strategies that encourage responsible use. They work with donors and originating agencies to ensure that any restrictions are appropriate, well-documented, and equitably enforced. When repositories require restrictions to protect confidential and proprietary information, such restrictions should be implemented in an impartial manner. In all questions of access, archivists seek practical solutions that balance competing principles and interests.

### **Privacy**

Archivists recognize that privacy is sanctioned by law. They establish procedures and policies to protect the interests of the donors, individuals, groups, and institutions whose public and private lives and activities are recorded in their holdings. As appropriate, archivists place access restrictions on collections to ensure that privacy and confidentiality are maintained, particularly for individuals and groups who have no voice or role in collections' creation, retention, or public use. Archivists promote the respectful use of culturally sensitive materials in their care by encouraging researchers to consult with communities of origin, 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 unfair advantage of their privileged access to and control of historical records and documentary materials. They execute their work knowing that they must ensure proper custody for the documents and records entrusted to them. Archivists should demonstrate professional integrity and avoid potential conflicts of interest. They strive to balance the sometimes-competing interests of all stakeholders.

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### **[Case Studies in Archival Ethics](#)**

Case studies drawn from real life 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).