Contexts for Understanding Professional Certification: Opening Pandora's Box?

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Abstract: The Society of American Archivists's recent decision to establish a program to certify individual archivists has been seen by both proponents and opponents as a sign of fundamental change in the nature and direction of the profession. While its merits and potential effects have been debated extensively, there are other contexts in which it should be considered, including as an example of the broader phenomena of professionalization and credentialism, as a means to define competencies for use in employment decisions, and as a generic aspect of the behavior of a professional association. Yet, these perspectives have not been brought to bear sufficiently on either side of the issue. To illustrate some of the larger dimensions of certification, this article reviews sociological and historical analyses of the professionalization process, human resource management studies of competency, legal issues, and case studies of four other occupational groups. It concludes with a commentary on archival certification and suggestions for the profession.

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ONE OF THE MOST distinctive features of white-collar work in the mid- to late-twentieth century has been the transformation of occupations into professions. Indeed, the process of professionalization is a fascinating field of study for sociologists, historians, and members of professions interested in the dynamics of their own work and associations.[1] While there is considerable diversity of opinion about what constitutes a profession, one commonly accepted characteristic of professional groups is the effort to define, promulgate, and enforce statements of the credentials expected of anyone practicing that profession. Frequently, these credentials consist of an outline of the education and degrees required as minimum qualifications; this outline is often coupled with a process of evaluating and accrediting educational programs to ensure that the courses offered by institutions meet the standards defined by the particular professional group.[2]

Establishing and maintaining a process to monitor the activities of educational institutions can be quite costly and require years of negotiations between the professional associations and the institutions. Thus, it is not surprising that more than 1,200 associations have chosen the alternative of developing certification programs to confer credentials on individual practitioners.[3] In theory, the professional association represents the greatest concentration of expertise in a particular occupation and is well qualified to define the elements necessary for professional practice. Through exams, petitions, or reviews of experience, the organization should be able to distinguish between the competent and the incompetent, and thereby confer a designation on those capable of professional practice.

At the same time, certification programs have been perceived as meeting other goals of professions and their organizations. These include improving the quality of practice in the field by establishing uniform standards and outlining goals for excellent service; protecting competent practitioners from intrusions on their work and from questioning of their credentials by clients, employers, and neighboring occupations; defining an occupation; and setting standards for education and performance.

Archivists' discussions of certification have reflected many of these concerns. Nonetheless, the coverage of certification in publications and meetings of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and other archival associations has been primarily descriptive or polemical, rather than analytical and evaluative. There has been little work to place the archival profession's experience within broader trends in twentieth-century society and work. To establish a multidisciplinary framework for understanding archival certification, it is useful to examine the sociological and historical context of professionalism, the relationship of certification programs to assessment of job competencies, the legal implications for employers and professional societies, and

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[1]For the purposes of this article, Morris L. Cogan's definition of 'profession' will be used: "A profession is a vocation whose practice is founded upon an understanding of the theoretical structure of some department of learning or science and upon the abilities accompanying such understanding" ("Toward a Definition of Profession," *Harvard Educational Review* 23 [Winter 1953]: 49, as quoted in *Professionalization*, ed. Howard M. Vollmer [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966], vii). Like Vollmer, the present essay will avoid the question of whether a particular occupation truly is a profession. Instead, it will accept the claims of professional status at face value and focus more on the process of professionalization. An opposing view on this semantic question, as well as a historical review of the term "profession," can be found in Eliot Friedson, *Professional Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 20–40.

[2]For example, see American Library Association, "Library Education and Personnel Utilization" (Chicago, 1970). This basic policy statement defines the nature of librarianship, professional and nonprofessional library work, and educational requirements for work. It has been reviewed and reaffirmed in 1975, 1978–1980, and 1985.

[3]"ASAE Backs Reliance on Association Credentialing Programs," *Association Management* 36 (April 1984): 41–43.

a few examples of professional certification programs.

This article is presented as a guide for archivists interested in expanding their understanding of the contexts of certification by examining the paradigms and literature of several disciplines. Like most guides, it can only touch on some of the more interesting themes, but it is written with the hope that it will encourage archivists to return to investigate these themes and ideas on their own. Naturally, the author's opinions influence the commentary; thus, it would be less than honest not to disclose that I am dubious of the value of professional association certification in general, and the certification of archivists in particular. This article, however, is not intended as a polemic against certification, but as an introduction to many of the complex issues involved in certification. I hope that both proponents and opponents of certification will find it a useful starting point for a more scholarly understanding of the issue.

It is important to clarify terminology at the outset because a number of related terms often are used with little precision.[4] *Certification* is a process by which a nongovernmental agency, such as a professional association, confers a title on an individual to indicate that he or she has met certain

minimum, predefined criteria. *Licensure* is a similar process by which a governmental agency, normally at the state level, grants individuals the right to practice a particular function and use a particular title. Both certification and licensure use one or more of the following screening devices: (1) successful completion of an approved course of study, (2) passing grade on one or more exams, and (3) completion of a specified amount of work.[5] *Registration* is a process by which individuals can be listed on an official roster of persons qualified to practice a particular specialty. Finally, *accreditation* is a process by which an institution or educational program is reviewed and approved as meeting the standards of a professional association or governmental program. Thus, educational or museum programs may be accredited by a professional body, but only individuals are certified (normally by professional associations) or licensed (normally by state agencies).

Social and Historical Context

The archival literature has begun to address the development of the archival profession in the context of broader sociological studies.[6] While recent articles can provide a good introduction, they exhibit a strong tendency to list the traditional com-

[4]For a more extensive discussion of these terms, see Jerald A. Jacobs, "The Principle of Reasonableness," in *Legal Aspects of Certification and Accreditation*, ed. Donald G. Langsly (Evanston, Ill.: American Board of Medical Specialists, 1983), 48–49. See also Julie A. Virgo, "Degree or License," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 51 (December 1976): 341.

[5]Certification has sometimes been used to describe state-operated programs, such as those that require public and state-supported libraries to employ only librarians certified by the state. One of the most far-reaching of such plans is that in Virginia. Mary J. Coe, ed., *Certification of Public Librarians in the United States* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1979).

[6]Richard J. Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986): 229–47. Cox's article is particularly valuable for its bibliographic review and citations, as well as an introduction to the elements of professionalism; two important follow-up letters to the editor can be found in *American Archivist* 50 (Summer 1987): 300–03. See also, Jacqueline Goggin, "That We Shall Truly Deserve the Title of 'Profession': The Training and Education of Archivists, 1930–1960," *American Archivist* 47 (Summer 1984): 243–54. The subject of the archivist as a professional was an important part of the debates conducted in the pages of *Archivaria* from 1983 through 1985 as part of a discussion of the importance of historical training for archivists. The highly polemical tone of the debate limits the value of these pieces for an analytical understanding of archival professionalism, but they merit examination for their variety of perspectives. See George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (1983): 5–25; "The Debate over History and Archives," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983–84): 286–308; "Counterpoint," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984): 241–47; "Counterpoint," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85): 185–95; and George Bolotenko, "Instant Professionalism?" *Archivaria* 20 (1985): 149–57.

ponents of a profession and then use these elements as a yardstick to determine whether archivists truly constitute a profession. This is a useful exercise since it enables archivists to understand their development in relation to other occupational groups, but it also misses important issues if a primary goal is to define an agenda of activities geared to fill perceived gaps so that archivists can acquire the classic attributes of a profession.

Neither archival literature nor that of other professions provides much assistance in assessing the value of certification programs in general because there are few analytical and comparative studies on the subject. Much of the writing reflects two extremes. At one extreme are narrative descriptions of, and justifications for, the programs, written from the perspective of the occupational groups that have adopted certification. In sharp contrast to these are critical articles in the popular press and scholarly journals that greet certification programs with growing skepticism.

A good example of the first trend is the literature of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE). To assist association executives, ASAE provides guidance on how certification programs can be developed and administered.[7] Given ASAE's position as the "trade association" for associations, it is not surprising that it has adopted a "governmental affairs position," or lobbying platform, that argues against judicial and legislative limits on the ability of professional bodies to certify and regulate. At the same time, ASAE's contention that government agencies should encourage development and use of certification programs is characteristic of the tendency of professional associations to look to governmental power to enforce the standards they develop.[8]

The widespread use of credentials conferred by professional associations, licenses granted by governmental bodies, and requirements for academic degrees has been criticized from a variety of economic and political perspectives in the popular press. In a recent example, James Fallows has argued that the emphasis on credentials causes a de-emphasis on the risk-taking entrepreneurial spirit of American business and life. He contrasts the "entrepreneurial" and the "professional" cultures and notes that the professional culture's reliance on expertise and emphasis on obtaining predetermined credentials stifles creativity. He also contends that credential requirements are both too restrictive (in limiting the avenues to work in so many areas) and too lax (in their imprecise relation to the skills actually needed for competent work).[9]

The ASAE and the Fallows articles are not, however, systematic explanations of the sociological and historical factors that have led to the emphasis on credentialism and professionalism. For a more scholarly and balanced understanding of the context of certification, one must turn to the work of sociologists and historians of professions. Because this literature is extensive and scattered across many disciplines, it can support several different perspectives on the merits of professionalism and credentialism. Sometimes it is repetitive and superficial, but there are many thought-provoking articles and books that provide a broader context for understanding professionalism.

Many writers have acknowledged that the desire for market control is a fundamental,

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[7]For example, see the three-part series of articles on establishing certification programs in *Association Management* 37 (August 1985): 125–34.

[8]"ASAE Backs Reliance on Association Credentialing Programs," *Association Management* 36 (April 1984): 41–43.

[9]James Fallows, "The Case Against Credentialism," *McKinsey Quarterly* (Spring 1986): 66–79. An earlier version of Fallows's article received broad circulation in the December 1985 *Atlantic Monthly*. A more detailed and systematic critique of the role of credentials can be found in Randall Collins, *The Credential Society* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

but rarely stated, motivation for the development of accreditation, licensure, and certification programs. For example, in a general overview of professions, Arlene Kaplan Daniels has argued that many of the efforts of professionals to establish control over education and employment are based on a monopolistic tendency of occupations, coupled with an ideology of autonomy. While the claims for self-governance are based on the premise of possession of special expertise, Daniels contended that "there is no reason to suggest that professional autonomy best meets the requirements for maintaining professional standards." Rather, many of the archetypical professions, such as law and medicine, operate like traditional guilds.[10]

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, other writers called into question the "public service and welfare" arguments used to justify certification and licensure, by noting that movements to regulate an occupation were invariably conducted by and for the occupational group, rather than by any "outraged group of consumers concerned about poor treatment by an underregulated profession."[11] In a comparative review of occupational regulation through nongovernmental professional associations, Daniel B. Hogan concluded that, contrary to their language of altruistic public service, professional associations acted predominantly in their own self-interest. While he was focusing primarily on the health professions, Hogan's conclusions can have broader validity. "Left to themselves, professional assocations are unlikely to achieve a high level of self-regulation. The historical tendency for such organizations has been to act in their own self-interest at

the expense of the public interest, when the two conflict."[12]

In fact, it has been argued that the essential elements of the professionalization of an occupation are anti-competitive activities to obtain control of the labor market, as well as attempts to secure recognition and status for a group, so that it will not experience interference from other, less expert, groups and individuals. Magali Sarfatti Larson has provided the most systematic explanation of these monopolistic tendencies. In *The Rise of Professionalism*, she combined a sociological analysis of social class and authority with a historical review of professions. She attempted to unlock underlying trends in the development of modern American research universities as well as explain developments in occupations such as social work, nursing, law, and medicine as part of the evolution of industrialism and capitalism. Historically minded archivists may not accept all of her Marxist-based argument that professionalism is part of a seamless web of capitalism's mechanisms for control of society. Nevertheless, Larson's analysis provides a framework for understanding that professionalism is an ideology developed to justify economic and social aspirations through claims for specialized knowledge, expertise, and mission. Her contention that the search for professional status is undeniably a middle class aspiration typical of socially mobile children of industrial and clerical workers merits serious attention by those seeking to understand why many occupations, such as those of archivists and librarians, continue to focus so heavily on issues of professional status.[13]

A recurrent theme in the writings of so-

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[10]Arlene Kaplan Daniels, "How Free Should Professions Be?" in *The Professions and Their Prospects*, ed. Eliot Freidson (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1973), 39–57.

[11]Douglas Wallace, "Occupational Licensing and Certification," *William and Mary Law Review* 14 (Fall 1972): 47–49.

[12]Daniel B. Hogan, *The Regulation of Psychotherapists,* Vol. 1, *A Study in the Philosophy and Practice of Professional Regulation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing, 1979), 331.

[13]Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xvi; see esp. chapters 9, 11, and 12.

ciologists and historians of professions is the importance, in an industrial society, of the concept of experts and expertise. With the increasing complexity and specialization of work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the variety of occupations has increased at the same time that the knowledge needed for many jobs has grown dramatically. This has fueled arguments for the need for specialists whose knowledge and authority may be unquestioned by those outside their occupational area.[14] The implications of the ideology of expertise are quite extensive, reaching into complex but important understandings of the theoretical bases for the legitimation of political organization. In a later work, Larson argued that the ideology of professionalism permitted a shift from the Hobbesian emphasis on power justifying itself to expertise as justifying power. By looking at the nature of the modern educational and political system, she contended that the emphasis on expertise actually became a mask for the perpetuation of the existing distribution of power, status, and wealth.[15] Admittedly, questions of the legitimation of political and economic authority in modern society may appear to stray from the discussion of how professional-society certification programs relate to the employment of competent individuals. Yet, they illustrate that activities within a single occupational group need to be examined in the context of how society establishes and utilizes authority.

Historians have examined the development of individual professions, especially law and medicine, but they have paid less attention to studying professionalization as a broad process. Nevertheless, many of the elements of professionalization stressed by sociologists can be found in historical studies. In a study of the medical profession in eighteenth-century Massachusetts and Connecticut, Peter Dobkin Hall discovered that it acquired authority more because of public and institutional politics than because of the intrinsic merits of improved public health through better medicine. In fact, he found that the authority and monopoly of this profession emerged long before the content and quality of medical practice could justify it.[16] Similarly, Dorothy Ross has argued that there is a connection between the efforts of early social scientists to obtain political power and their emphasis on the authority of science.[17]

The history of American folklorists from the 1930s through the 1960s was traced by John Alexander Williams in a study that exemplifies how professionalism is a complex process that mixes politics with the specialization and rationalization of work.[18] In the case of folklorists, he found that the rhetoric of securing greater respectability and credibility through establishment of higher standards could mask political undercurrents. While some of these undercurrents originated in extra-occupational concerns (i.e., New Deal versus McCarthy era politics), which may not apply to many other professions, Williams's study emphasized that the core of the process of professionalization is a political one of establishing the power of an elite over a discipline, and that the quest for status and

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[14]Eliot Freidson, "Are Professions Necessary?" in *The Authority of Experts: Studies in History and Theory*, ed. Thomas L. Haskell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4–16.

[15]Magali Sarfatti Larson, "The Production of Expertise and the Constitution of Expert Power," in Haskell, *Authority*, 28–80. By no means is Larson's the only approach to understanding professionalization. It is offered, however, because it demonstrates the complexity of the social and political background of professional organizations. See Goggin, "The Training and Education of Archivists, 1930–1960," 245, for reference to additional studies.

[16]Peter Dobkin Hall, "The Social Foundations of Professional Credibility," in Haskell, *Authority*, 107, 134–36.

[17]Dorothy Ross, "American Social Science and the Idea of Progress," in Haskell, *Authority*, 157–61.

[18]John Alexander Williams, "Radicalism and Professionalism in Folklore Studies: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11 (1975): 211–34.

funding is an inseparable part of it.

The work of Thomas L. Haskell helps explain the role of authority and the nature of knowledge in the development of professions. In a detailed study of the American Social Science Association, Haskell found that traditional histories of professions were unsatisfactory because they failed to account for the centrality of the desire to establish authority in intellectual and moral matters. In American social science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he found evidence of T. S. Kuhn's contention that professionalization was a measure not of quality, but of community. In other words, to describe someone as professional is to say more about the person's habit of looking to occupational communities than about the quality of his or her work.[19] At the same time, by examining how the American Social Science Association became increasingly less effective, Haskell demonstrated that the organization's inability to solve problems within its multiple disciplines was critical to the failure of its claim to authority.

In a later study, Haskell explored the philosophical and epistemological roots of the claim that professionals deserve autonomy and deference because they are disinterested in personal gain. He argued that the acceptance of these claims of disinterestedness had permitted a great expansion in the professional's authority in the early twentieth century.[20] Nevertheless, he pointed to the characteristics of the modern research university to demonstrate that the mere absence of clear monetary interest in the achievement of professional goals did

not remove the professional from the realm of self-interest and competition. Rather "competitiveness is more pervasive, and reliance on the social discipline generated by competition is more complete, in the modern professions than in the business world." By contrasting the philosophical basis for claims of professional expertise to the competitive nature of professions, Haskell underscored the need to examine critically such professional claims to authority.[21]

This brief review of the sociological and historical literature only touches the surface of the issues uncovered by scholarly studies of professionalism. Many additional and even countervailing conclusions can be drawn from these and other studies.[22] They suggest, however, that an adequate understanding of professionalizing activities, such as certification, must begin with a recognition of the broad social, historical, and political context in which professions have developed in the twentieth century. Such studies demonstrate that the complex background to an occupation's use of certification must be examined from perspectives that go well beyond the theory and practice of work in a particular discipline.

Competence and Certification: The Employer's Perspective

Another context for understanding certification is to consider the perspective of employers as they seek to determine how the credentials conferred by professional associations relate to actual on-the-job competence. Indeed, most employers may be less interested in the broad historical and social issues than in the credibility of cer-

[19]Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), vi, 18.

[20]Haskell, *Authority*, xxix.

[21]Thomas L. Haskell, "Professionalism versus Capitalism," in Haskell, *Authority*, 219; see also 214–15 and 218–20.

[22]One important area that has not been covered is the psychological dimension of professionalism, such as the impact that the self-image of the professional has on his or her work and career patterns. For example, see Joseph Raelin, "An Examination of Deviant/Adaptive Behavior in the Organization Careers of Professionals," *Academy of Management Review* 9 (1984): 413–27; and Richard H. Hall, "Professional/Management Relations: Imagery vs. Action," *Human Resource Management* 24 (1985): 227–36.

tificates. The sociological and historical literature on professions provides considerable useful background on the motivations and characteristics of credentialing, but it lacks practical evaluations of the usefulness of certification. Instead, it leaves unanswered the question of whether such credentials can be reliable indications of the ability to perform a given occupation. What is needed is a means to examine the nature of certification programs and their ability to identify job-performance related factors.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the value of certification as an employment credential because there have been few independent assessments of such programs. The most common discussions consist of outlines of requirements, identification of revisions in a program, and statistical summaries on numbers of individuals certified to date.[23] Occasionally, associations have polled members on their opinions on the value and effectiveness of the certification program, but critical analyses of whether a certification program actually contributes to the quality of work in a field are conspicuously absent. This is not particularly surprising since those members with sufficient knowledge of a field to comment on the quality of work are often so closely tied to the professional world that created the credentialing structure as to make critical analysis unlikely.[24] At the same time, the performance of work within a single profession often is of very little interest to those far enough outside the profession to have greater objectivity.

One of the rare comparative studies to shed light on these problems is a 1980 report, "The Assessment of Occupational Competence," prepared by McBer and Company for the National Institute of Education (NIE).[25] This seven-part study examined the use of competence assessment in personnel selection and its relation to higher education and certification programs. It is particularly useful because it focused on how occupational competence should be assessed and because it surveyed the practices in a diverse cross section of disciplines.

The study found that while certification was used in more than two thousand occupations in the United States, more attention needed to be focused on whether certification is an accurate indication of job performance ability and thus a valid employment criterion. This issue has become a particular concern because of court challenges of employment selection criteria, based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and growing employer concern over the quality of the work force. To assess the validity of certification, the authors of the study turned to the concept of competency-based assessment. Competence can be defined as the entirety of characteristics, or knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable an individual to perform a job effectively. A competency-based study involves the following steps: detailed analysis of the tasks involved in a job to define what knowl-

[23]For example, Susan M. Bronder, "Gaining Professional Status: The Leadership Role of the Institute of Certified Records Managers," *Records Management Quarterly* 18 (January 1984): 20–26; Christine Bain, "Certification and Continuing Education for Medical Librarians," *The Bookmark* 49 (Fall 1985): 4–12; and "Take Part in ASAE's Certification Program," *Association Management* 38 (May 1986): 25.

[24]A parallel example can be seen in the frequent criticism of library education. Each criticism, however, is promptly followed by a defense of the basic nature and structure of ALA-accredited M.L.S. programs. For example, see Herbert White, "Defining Basic Competencies," *American Libraries* 14 (September 1983): 519–25 and the follow-up comments in the October 1983 (p. 618), December 1983 (p. 704), and January 1984 (pp. 17–18) issues.

[25]George O. Klemp, et al., "The Assessment of Occupational Competence" (Boston: McBer and Company, 1980), report prepared for the National Institute of Education contract 400-78-0028 (ERIC Document Reproduction Service nos. ED 192 164 [Introduction], ED 192 165 [Part 1], ED 192 166 [Part 2], ED 192 167 [Part 3], ED 192 168 [Part 4], ED 192 169 [Part 5], and ED 192 170 [Part 6]). Hereafter cited as "Occupational Competence." Each section is paginated separately and citations include the part number and page number. The page numbers cited are those rubber-stamped over the original typescript page numbers.

edge, skills, and abilities are necessary for the job; development of measures of the competencies to perform the job; and, finally, the validation of these measurements against actual job performance.[26]

The study outlined rigorous criteria to determine which occupational certification programs were truly competency-based. Surprisingly, it was unable to find any that satisfied its standards. The authors then modified their study to look at what practices were being used in a sample of seventy occupations represented by forty certifying agencies, largely in scientific and medical fields. The results of this study were equally troubling: only 24 percent of the organizations in the sample had used some form of task or job analysis to develop a certification exam. The balance relied solely on the consensus of "experts" in the field to identify the content for certifying exams. The methods used for development of the examination instrument were also troubling—54 percent developed the exam "in-house," 26 percent used a combination of in-house development and professional advice, and only 10 percent relied significantly on the services of outside consultants who specialized in the development of exams and assessment instruments.[27]

Overall, the study found that validation of the exams normally did not extend beyond "face" or content validity; that is, a review of the content of the exams showed only a logical relationship between the content of the exam and the work of the job in question. Few, if any, certification exams had been validated by the more rigorous criteria of construct validity (whether the exam measured what it purported to measure and whether the measurement was critical for job performance), concurrent validity (whether the measurement corresponded to the performance of present em-

ployees), or predictive validity (whether the measurement provided a reliable basis to select employees who would meet the desired performance standards).

The study also discovered a number of problems with the format and method of construction of certification exams. For 90 percent of the occupations studied, the primary testing method was a series of questions, usually multiple choice, focusing on textbook knowledge of the field. In only 19 percent of the occupations did the exams incorporate any practical simulation of job-performance conditions, such as description of a work problem followed by a request for analysis and recommendations for action.[28]

Perhaps the most fundamental problem with the examinations, according to the 1980 study, was that they were predominantly knowledge based, rather than focused on the traditional quartet of "knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics" (KSAOs) that personnel administrators have long identified as the basic analytic device for selecting and evaluating employees. Instead, the exams generally concentrated on the mastery of the theoretical and informational content of a particular discipline, and they often ignored the fact that what distinguishes the excellent from the merely competent is the ability to interpret and apply this base of information, as well as the interpersonal skills critical to implement standards for professional work.

The fact that many certification exams focused on knowledge of a core of information is not surprising considering that so many were developed with little assistance from outside organizations. Too often, professional associations seeking to minimize the costs of certification relied on current leaders to serve as experts who could identify the elements needed for profes-

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[26]A distinction also needs to be drawn between the competencies needed for satisfactory performance and those needed for superior performance. Testing for both can become quite complex.

[27]"Occupational Competence," 3.8, 3.42–67.

[28]Ibid., 3.80–83.

sional work in the field. This approach, often called ''arm-chair analytic,'' had been shown to have little validity in predicting actual job performance.[29] The NIE study argued that associations needed to conduct far more research to identify the indicators of competence, design measures of those indicators, and then demonstrate the relation between the measures and performance.

The overall conclusions of the 1980 study on the value of professional certification programs were quite critical:

> Their stated functions, those that primarily justify their existence, are governance in maintaining standards and discipline, and the protection of the public welfare. . . . [T]he degree to which these functions are carried out is, at best, uncertain. More certain are the secondary consequences of practices, including the control of the supply of workers, which affect the wages of the licensed and certified, the enhancement of the status of an occupation or profession, and the prestige of practitioners. There is more in licensing and certification that clearly benefits the professions and professionals, therefore, than there is that clearly benefits the consumer.[30]

Certainly, the NIE study is not without flaws, such as its lack of specifics on the occupations surveyed; it has, however, formed the center of this discussion of certification and employment competency because it demonstrates the difficulty of determining whether certification can predict employee competence and success. Establishing a certification program that improves practice in an occupation, then, is much more complex than assembling the

best minds of the profession to define the minimum knowledge and skills. If the effort is to be successful, substantial resources are needed to support extensive research to accurately identify the nature of work in the field and the attributes of successful professionals. Furthermore, the NIE study's emphasis on validation-based competency assessment provides an important corrective to the more usual ''arm-chair analytic'' approach used in developing certification programs. Through its systematic review of validation and competence, it cautions program planners not to claim more for the certification credential than they can prove reasonably, nor to place too great an emphasis on speedy implementation and cost savings.

Legal Issues and Implications

Frequently, discussions of certification raise the question of whether establishing a program will expose the association to legal liabilities. This is an appropriate question, and there are a number of legal concerns that the archival profession should consider as it moves toward certification. Nevertheless, the experience of other organizations suggests there are ways to limit or preclude liability. A brief review of three general areas of law—due process, civil rights, and anti-trust—can provide a context for understanding how liability of certification can be limited. At the same time, a review of the law and the methods of analysis used by the courts suggests guidelines for developing fair and open certification programs.

The due process provisions of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution often are cited in discussions of licensure and certification insofar as the amendments' references to ''property'' might form the basis for a claim by an individual denied access to a job because of

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[29]Ibid., 6.13.
[30]Ibid., 6.26.

the lack of a certificate. Since the Fourteenth Amendment focuses on state action in the denial of due process, however, it may not be a solid basis for claims regarding professional society certification programs, unless such certification is also required for state licensing to practice the profession. The Fifth Amendment's due process clause can have broader applicability, but the courts have not applied it directly to such issues as employment. Instead, they have focused on other legislation, primarily civil rights and anti-trust. In considering due process liability, the key issue for professional associations is whether certification programs include ample appeals and review procedures for all applicants.[31]

The Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1871, and 1964 have been used in a variety of employment discrimination cases. The 1964 Act, subsequent court decisions, and guidelines of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) have substantial implications for how employers establish criteria for jobs. Especially after the 1971 Supreme Court decision in *Griggs v. Duke Power*, the need to validate the job-relatedness of all employee selection criteria has been emphasized.[32]

Thus, for example, before deciding that certification in medical librarianship is an exclusionary requirement for employment as a bibliographer in a hospital library, the employer should be familiar with the content of the Medical Libraries Association certification program and attempt to validate that the certification can be shown to be related to the specific job in question. The need for employers and associations to

be cautious in the kinds of requirements they establish for employment credentials also is illustrated by the case of Glenda Merwine, who filed a sex discrimination suit against Mississippi State University after she was denied employment in the library. Her suit questioned the validity of the university's requirement that candidates for the position have a master of library science degree from an institution accredited by the American Library Association. It thereby raised questions about employers' use of credentials established by professional associations. Even though the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately refused to consider Merwine's claim, the case showed that professional association credentials can be easily drawn into litigation.[33]

While civil rights legislation and regulation are important issues in fair employment practice, they may have less direct relevance to professional association certification programs. Perhaps the best guidance for professional associations is that provided in the 1980 NIE report on the assessment of competence: "those competency-based education and performance assessment measures which are consistent with acceptable professional standards, are implemented in good faith, and provide reasonable procedural guarantees to those being assessed, are not likely to be subjected to further probing judicial scrutiny."[34]

Increasingly, a major legal issue for professional association certification and governmental licensing has been anti-trust claims against credentialing programs. Even if a program does not obviously stifle competition, it may adversely affect it, and the

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[31]Three criteria used in adjudication—specificity, rationality, and fairness—can provide guidance for both employers and professional associations to ensure their programs provide due process. See James D. Herbsleb, Bruce D. Sales, and Thomas D. Overcast, "Challenging Licensure and Certification," *American Psychologist* 40 (November 1985): 1166.

[32]*Griggs* v. *Duke Power Company*, 401 U.S. 424 (1971). For a comprehensive introduciton to equal employment opportunity issues, see Barbara Lindemann Schlei and Paul Grossman, *Employment Discrimination Law* (Washington: Bureau of National Affairs, 1983).

[33]*Glenda Merwine* v. *Board of Trustees for State Institutions of Higher Learning*, 754 F.2d 631 (5th Cir. 1985).

[34]"Occupational Competence," 5.67.

program can be examined to determine if its purpose and effect are anti-competitive. Nevertheless, many of the court cases have related to setting fee structures and other anti-competitive practices of professional bodies—issues likely to be of less concern for archival certification.

Of most interest are the anti-trust cases in which the courts have ruled that professional or learned societies are not exempt from review, and that professional societies can be held liable for the actions of their agents. While these cases have focused on anti-trust issues in occupations more lucrative than archives and librarianship, they reflect an increasing willingness of the courts to question the autonomy and independence claimed by professional associations. At the same time, the criteria for the courts' analyses of the "reasonableness" of a practice can be instructive for those developing certification programs. They include whether an individual was denied access to certification because of lack of membership in the certifying association (or a related group), requirements that only association sponsored courses are eligible for credits toward certification, and requirements that certified members deal only with other certified members.[35] Finally, the practices should not just be neutral to competition, but they should promote it.[36]

This review of due process, civil rights, and anti-trust issues suggests that the legal liability of professional associations establishing certification is not overwhelming; however, the criteria used in civil rights, due process, and anti-trust cases should guide the establishment of programs to ensure fairness and limit legal liability. By understanding the legal issues, opponents

of certification may be less likely to focus on the danger of lawsuits in an effort to forestall a decision on certification other than on its own merits.[37]

Case Studies

Legal and competency-based issues as well as the social and historical background of professionalism demonstrate that understanding certification is quite complex. A final context to be considered as archivists embark on studies of certification is a critical assessment of how it has been applied in other occupations. There have been occasional reviews of the experience of other professions to assist in understanding the condition of archivists. Too often, however, these have been restricted to narrative descriptions of credentials in neighboring professions, such as those of librarians, historians, museum curators, and records managers. When looking beyond these professions, archivists have tended to look at the classic professions of law and medicine, which bear little relevance in most instances when the comparison has been invoked. Instead, archivists need to examine credentialing programs critically and in greater depth so that, for example, they move beyond general comments on the ALA-accredited master of library science degree in order to explore how specific groups of librarians have established credentials for their specialty. Furthermore, archivists might profitably look at a variety of other occupations operating at different social, economic, and technical levels, rather than assuming that each is so unique and inherently complex that examples from such wide-ranging fields as media technicians, medical librarians, or training and devel-

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[35]George D. Webster, "Consider the Implications," *Association Management* 37 (August 1985): 133–34. See also *Bogus* v. *American Speech & Hearing Association*, 582 F.2d 277 (1978); and Jerald A. Jacobs, "The Principle of Reasonableness," in Donald G. Langsly, ed., *Legal Aspects of Certification and Accreditation* (Evanston, Ill.: American Board of Medical Specialists, 1983), 51–52.

[36]Jacobs, "Principle of Reasonableness," 60.

[37]Herbsleb, "Challenging Licensure and Certification," 1165.

opment specialists would be irrelevant.[38]

The broad variations in the content, development, and use of professional certification programs can be seen by looking at the activity of four professional associations in the fields of human resources (personnel) management, and law and medical librarianship. Ideally, a comparative review of such programs would be based on a history of the program's establishment, analysis of its content and formulation, statistical studies of professionals certified, and assessment of the effect of the program on employment and the quality of professional practice. Unfortunately, this is not possible because of a lack of detailed data on program operations and of critical reviews of program effectiveness, and because of the tendency of each occupation to discuss its program in isolation from others and from sociological and economic analyses of work.

Lacking this information, a summary of these four programs will illustrate characteristics common to certification as a whole. While no single example is archetypical, each contains many features of the professionalization process whereby practitioners in a particular work area seek to elevate it from a specialty to a self-governing profession composed of individuals with specialized knowledge, high standards, and lifelong dedication to their work. These features include attempts to define and establish a distinct area of work as a recognized specialty, efforts to establish control over the marketplace by defining who may call themselves a professional in that field, efforts to secure greater recognition for the importance and social utility of the particular occupation, and use of certification as a defensive or offensive weapon in skirmishes with groups in neighboring occupational fields.

Readers may draw different conclusions from the cases presented below, but each example can substantially broaden archivists' perspectives as they consider their own efforts at certification. The case of personnel administrators illustrates a fairly typical use of certification to enhance the position of an occupation by establishing a credential and thereby bring unity to a field characterized by many different educational and career paths. Both the goals and the structural elements of the personnel administrators bear striking similarity to elements of the archival plans. The example of law librarians shows the problems of a profession wedged between two other highly credentialed professions, law and librarianship. While the law librarians' program was not the most rigorous, the study that accompanied its abandonment is one of the few examples of critical analysis of certification. The medical librarians have maintained the oldest and most fully developed program in the area of library and information science, but its case demonstrates that change and revision may be a constant feature of certification programs. Finally, the training and development field illustrates an alternative approach to certification that has focused heavily on the identification of competencies as the first step in improving practice and identifying minimum credentials.

Personnel Administrators. In the mid-1970s, members of the American Society of Personnel Administrators (ASPA) established the Personnel Accreditation Institute (PAI) to administer a certification program. The program was designed to improve the quality of personnel work and assist employers in identifying individuals who were truly qualified for personnel management posts. Two other goals of the program were characteristic of certification efforts in

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[38]A review of the experience of other associations was part of the SAA Council's discussion of, and decision on, certification ("Council Minutes," 30 January–1 February 1987, Agenda Item 10, SAA Archives). Since such detailed analyses have not been broadly disseminated, the following case studies are presented as examples of the kinds of insights that come from a critical review of other certification programs.

"emerging" or "under-recognized" professions: to assist in creating a common body of knowledge that could form the core of the profession, and to "foster increased acceptance of personnel management as a professional endeavor." Overall, the PAI illustrates classic features of a certification program—it is expected to define a new profession, and it is inextricably tied to the pursuit of recognition and status.

By 1983 a total of five thousand persons had been certified at one of the three levels for "professionals in human resources." Only one thousand had taken the exam— the rest had been admitted under the initial "grandparenting" phase. Because the PAI was concerned that this five thousand represented only 1.3 percent of the estimated personnel professionals in the United States, it conducted a systematic survey to assess the program.[39] The results showed that while 87 percent of the members of the ASPA were familiar with the certification program, awareness elsewhere in the personnel administration field was estimated at no more than 30 percent. Moreover, only 20 percent of the surveyed ASPA members had been certified. Many survey respondents identified program weaknesses, such as poor publicity, exam design, and content. A large majority (75 percent) did not think that the program had improved professional practice significantly. While progress had been made on defining a common body of knowledge, most felt that greater public recognition and respect had not been obtained. The survey and other studies also suggested that there was little correlation between certification and salary scales. Despite these findings, the PAI has retained

certification, and it is in the process of assessing and revising the program.[40] The example of the PAI also suggests a broader problem. Even in a profession dealing with the recruitment and selection of personnel, it can be very difficult for the goals and programs of a professional society to be translated into personnel decisions by the employers of these professionals.

Law Librarians. In 1960, after nearly three decades of debate, the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) adopted a plan for certification of law librarians. Under the program, members could file an application requesting that the AALL's Certification Board confer a certificate indicating ability to serve as a law librarian. The program's goal was to provide employers with evidence of competence and law librarians with formal recognition of their accomplishments. Requirements for certification included four alternative sets of credentials: an ALA-accredited master of library science degree and an American Bar Association-accredited law degree plus two years of experience; or a law degree and four years of library experience; or a library degree and six years of experience; or twenty years of experience but no specific degree. The board reviewed and acted on the application, and unsuccessful applicants could file an appeal.

While the program certified 1,047 individuals from 1961 to 1984, members of the AALL began to question its value. In a December 1982 report, the Certification Board criticized the program as "meaningless" and asked the AALL Executive Board either to strengthen or abandon certification.[41] The Certification Board proposed a

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[39]Gerald A. Bayley, John D. Jackson, and James G. Johnston, "Accreditation: A Survey to Assess the PAI Program," *Personnel Journal* 63 (July 1984): 58–62.

[40]The PAI has recently embarked on another extensive (twenty-page) survey of members to improve its understanding of the body of knowledge required for personnel administration (*Codification Project: Body of Knowledge Questionnaire* [Alexandria, Va: Personnel Accreditation Institute, 1988]).

[41]"Certification Board Mid-Year Report," 1 December 1982, Roger Jacobs Papers, Record Series 85/1/205, Box 1, AALL Archives, Urbana, Ill. See also "Certification Board Issues Mid-Year Report," *AALL Newsletter* 14 (May/June 1983): 200.

new program incorporating examinations, detailed eligibility requirements, and three levels of certification.

A special committee appointed by the Executive Board to examine the issue of certification reviewed the literature on certification, polled past presidents, consulted with the Medical Library Association about its program, and reviewed the results of a members' forum held at the 1983 annual meeting. The special committee's report displayed considerable skepticism about the AALL program and certification in general. It found: (1) No past president supported certification; rather, most thought AALL's program ineffectual and doubted that the new program could produce results to justify the effort and expense. (2) While the Medical Library Association's program was far more rigorous, it offered no clear benefits to the individual or the association. (3) The literature on certification was quite disappointing because it offered few critical analyses of certification programs and provided little evidence that certification programs delivered the benefits they promised.[42] In the words of one committee member, "The evidence suggests that rewards and status are related to the real or perceived value of the professional's service to society, not the artificial imposition of licensure or certification requirements."[43]

The committee determined that the original AALL plan was seriously flawed and should be abandoned. It acknowledged that the proposed strengthening of the program might solve some of the structural problems, but concluded that the benefits of certification were too intangible to justify the time and costs involved. Following the

session at the 1983 annual meeting, the AALL Executive Board abolished the certification program, emphasizing a preference for "the concept of lifelong continuing education" and its impression that "noneducation based certification was more appropriate to trade than [to] educational associations."[44]

Medical Librarians. The Medical Library Association (MLA) sponsors the oldest and most thoroughly developed certification program in the library and information science professions. Since its establishment in 1949, the MLA program has maintained "progressive" multi-level (e.g., Grade I, Grade II, and Grade III) certification for medical librarians. The program was reviewed and revised in 1956, 1964, 1974-78, 1981, and 1985-87 to adjust requirements for experience, education, examination content, recertification, and continuing education. MLA describes the program as competency-based, and its exams have included both multiple-choice, knowledge-type questions as well as test situations to simulate the kinds of problems that arise in daily work in medical libraries.[45] Exams have been developed by MLA members and staff, with the assistance of educational consultants.

The 1985-87 revision incorporated both certification (which required an ALA-accredited M.L.S. and two years of experience) and registration (which allowed for persons receiving nonaccredited M.L.S. degrees and degrees in related fields). Both required passing a two-part examination. The programs have been designed to document entry-level competence, provide direction in shaping career goals, facilitate self-assessments and encourage the devel-

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[42]"Interim Report of Special Board Committee on Certification," 11 May 1983, Roger Jacobs Papers, Box 1.

[43]Roger Jacobs, "Comment on the Certification Board Report," *AALL Newsletter* 14 (May/June 1983): 201.

[44]"President's Letter," *AALL Newsletter* 15 (March 1984): 157; "Annual Business Meeting," *AALL Newsletter* 16 (August 1984): 5.

[45]Christine Bain, "Certification and Continuing Education," 5–6.

opment of professional contacts.[46] The program also included a process for recertification, dependent on earning a specified number of continuing education credits. The credits could be earned from the MLA and MLA-approved courses as well as from other courses approved on petition from the individual.

This plan was to take effect in 1987, but a series of recent changes have significantly altered the nature of MLA's program. At the May 1987 MLA annual meeting, the Board of Directors postponed the implementation of the new certification and registration program so it could coordinate credentialing activities with a long-range strategic plan.[47] Subsequently, the certification plan has been substantially revamped, and most certification activities have been suspended. A new revised plan maintains both recertification and a progression of levels. It includes an outline of essential areas of knowledge for each level, but it replaces the exam with certification by petition only. MLA staff had anticipated that the new plan would be approved at the May 1988 annual meeting, but a resolution at the MLA's business meeting called for a membership survey on the issue, followed by a referendum on the plan scheduled for October 1988.[48]

To the skeptical observer, the frequency of changes and revisions to the MLA program suggests its members are unclear about the value and effectiveness of the certification process. The program has been criticized by MLA members as being of little value, but analytical and critical studies are difficult to find.[49] When members of the AALL's special committee on certification examined the MLA program in 1983, they were struck with the high cost of maintaining the MLA program (three full-time staff members plus volunteers) and the fact that MLA officials were unable to provide clear evidence that the program benefited its members or the medical library profession. AALL's committee was left with the impression that the MLA had become "locked into" a certification program and had little choice but to continue it.[50] While AALL's review predated the recent extensive revisions of the MLA program, the series of revisions in the past few years suggests that even a thoroughly and carefully developed certification program can have substantial difficulty in proving itself effective. At best, MLA's experience indicates that frequent extensive revisions of a program are necessary to respond to the concerns of members of the profession.

Training and Development. A different approach to certification can be found in the case of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), the association for personnel administrators, educators, and consultants involved in training and staff development programs. Since the late 1960s, the ASTD has been considering the issues of defining the profession and establishing greater quality control over its practitioners. Like many associations, it has considered certification, but unlike other associations, it started by looking at the substance of the field, defining competencies, and determining relationships to other

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[46]"Certification and Registration for Health Sciences Librarians: Information for Applicants," (Chicago: Medical Library Association, 1986).

[47]"Dear Colleague" letter from M. Kent Mayfield, MLA Director of Education, 29 May 1987, sent with the "Information for Applicants."

[48]Medical Library Association, "Report of the Credentialing Committee," March 1988; telephone interviews of Eileen Fitzsimmons of the MLA Education Department, 4 January 1988 and 3 June 1988; "Dear Colleague" letter from Eileen Fitzsimmons, June 1988.

[49]Bain, "Certification and Continuing Education," 4; Holly Shipp Buchanan, "President's Page: Ownership," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 75 (1987): 370.

[50]Marcia Koslov to Roger Jacobs and Shirley Bysiewicz, 31 March 1983, Roger Jacobs Papers, Record Series 85/1/205, Box 1, AALL Archives, Urbana, Ill.

disciplines. ASTD has regarded certification less as a ready means of controlling the profession and more as one element in a broader process of setting standards and defining competencies.[51]

From 1981 to 1983, ASTD conducted a lengthy process of defining standards; polling practitioners, instructors, and consumers of training and development services; and researching certification programs in allied fields. The resulting product was far from the typical certification program. Rather, the ASTD developed a detailed outline of the field of training and development and a sophisticated list (204 pages) of the competencies needed to consider oneself a professional in that field.[52] The study recommended that the report become a basis for the formulation of a position on certification, which may lead to a certification program. Before it would consider whether certification might be appropriate, ASTD was committed to making the first step a definition of the field and an outline of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to excel. Early responses on the use of the outline of competencies suggested that the process provided a substantive base for employers' decisions regarding job requirements, educators' reviews of the content of courses, and professionals' analyses of the potential usefulness of certification.[53] To address problems in the 1983 ASTD document and add more specificity, a major revision has been planned.

Archivists and Certification

Archival certification exhibits many of the classic issues and problems in the formation of a certification program. As early as the 1950s, archivists debated the creation of an examination-based certification process as a means to increase the professional standing of archivists.[54] In the 1970s, studies by the SAA's Committee on Education and Professional Development looked at mechanisms to improve the quality of archival practice through the accreditation of educational programs and/or certification of archivists. As the committee encountered a "negative climate" for new accreditation programs and developed concerns about potential costs and possible litigation, it retreated in 1981 from proposals either for accreditation of educational programs or certification of individuals.[55]

Given sociological findings that a driving force of professionalization is the desire for greater status for an occupation and its practitioners, the context of the 1984 resuscitation of archival certification is quite interesting. Ongoing concerns about standards and the quality of archival education were a factor, and an important consideration was that other approaches to establishing control over archival credentials, education, and practice (e.g., accreditation of educational programs or institutional evaluation) had not succeeded. Thus certification reappeared as the most realistic or feasible alternative, but its revival was cast in the language of the "archives and society" initiative, which was aimed at major improvements in archivists' poor public and self-images. Certification was suggested as a means to establish standards, measure abilities, and "improve the image of the archivist more effectively and

[51]"Voices of Experience," *Association Management* 37 (August 1985): 130.

[52]Patricia A. McLagan, *Models for Excellence* (Washington, D.C.: American Society for Training and Development, 1983). For a summary of the report and discussion of its impact on the field, see the two articles in *Training and Development Journal* 37 (June 1983): 10–38.

[53]"The ASTD Competency Study . . . A Year Later," *Training and Development Journal* 38 (May 1984): 12–16.

[54]Goggin, "Training and Education of Archivists, 1930–1960," 251–52.

[55]"Education Committee Submits Summary Report," *SAA Newsletter* (March 1982): 10–12.

speedily than any other activity."[56]

A proposal outlining the certification program, examination procedures, and a point system for recertification was presented in 1985-86. Following review and comments of SAA members, a revised proposal was prepared in summer 1986 for further discussion.[57] A survey of SAA membership in late 1986 produced ambiguous results. A slight majority (51.8 percent) favored the concept of certification. The SAA's 1986 plan drew the support of nearly equal numbers (43.9 in favor and 42.1 percent opposed). Given the prospective role of certification as an employment credential, it is interesting that of those with the responsibility for hiring archivists, only 29.8 percent indicated that certification would be a factor in decisions on hiring.[58]

After reviewing the survey and debating the issue, SAA's Council voted, in early 1987, to initiate a revised certification program.[59] Since that time, it has appointed an Interim Board for Certification to develop policies and procedures for examination, certification by petition (commonly called "grandparenting") and recertification. Subsequently, the board has planned a one-year grandparenting period and negotiation of a contract with a private test development firm to help prepare a certi-fication exam for use after the petition period. Development of the exam is a complex and evolving process, which includes preparation of task statements, development of knowledge skills and abilities statements, and formulation of exam questions.[60] These elements indicate that the program has begun to use far more sophisticated techniques as it has evolved. Indeed, much of the writing of SAA officers and staff has stressed that the program will be competency-based; will examine skills and abilities, not just knowledge, necessary for archival work; and will be developed with assistance from professional testing companies.[61] Nevertheless, preliminary planning for the program, the desire to speed the process, and often expressed concerns about containing costs suggest there is a risk that those developing the program may follow the "arm-chair analytic" model more than the complex validation procedures suggested by the NIE report.[62]

It is premature to judge the effectiveness of the SAA program, or even to define the terms by which its success or failure might be measured. In the area of certification as an employment criterion, however, only modest expectations would seem appropriate. Given the 1986 survey's results regarding hiring decisions and the limited

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[56]David B. Gracy, "The Call from the Grassroots: Rise and Shine," *American Archivist* 47 (Summer 1984): 342. See also report of SAA Council meeting of 16–21 May 1984, *American Archivist* 47 (Fall 1984): 472.

[57]"Certification," *SAA Newsletter*, July 1985, 7–10; "Archival Certification Program," *SAA Newsletter*, August 1986, 6–9.

[58]William L. Joyce, "The SAA Certification Program," *SAA Newsletter*, May 1987, 8–9. While it covered a different pool of archivists, a 1988 Midwest Archives Conference survey reinforced the conclusion that certification had failed to garner the support of the archival profession. In the MAC survey, only 37 percent favored the concept of certification; only 16 percent favored the SAA plan, and 49 percent opposed it. The tensions involved in the issue, however, are illustrated by the fact that 33 percent of respondents said they would apply for certification whether they supported the SAA plan or not. Ann Bowers, "MAC Certification Survey," *MAC Newsletter* 16:1 (July 1988): 12–14.

[59]Joyce, "SAA Certification Program," 8–9; "Council Minutes," 30 January–1 February 1987, Agenda Item 10, SAA Archives.

[60]"Report of the Interim Board for Certification," *SAA Newsletter*, January 1988, 10–15. The board's plan to limit the exam to multiple-choice questions contrasts with the findings of the NIE competency assessment report that multiple-choice questions focus on the knowledge component of competencies far more than on the equally critical skills and abilities that can distinguish the adequate from the excellent.

[61]Donn C. Neal, "The Society of American Archivists," *Illinois Libraries* 69 (October 1987): 541–42; Sue E. Holbert, "Open Letter to the SAA Membership on Certification," *SAA Newsletter*, May 1988, 10.

[62]Agenda and Attachments for 8–9 November 1987 meeting of the Interim Board for Certification, SAA Archives; "Certification Update," *SAA Newsletter*, July 1988, 5.

success of other associations in obtaining employer acceptance of their programs, one should not be overly optimistic that the SAA program will have the "effective and speedy" employment benefits that some have hoped. In the end, the process may be more important as a means for the profession to improve its self-image than its public image.

Insofar as certification is intended to raise standards, one must wonder whether archivists are proceeding in the most effective way since they are establishing certification before creating the standards that it is to enforce. This appears to be a case of placing the cart before the horse by focusing on the enforcement mechanism rather than on the goal of developing standards and statements of competencies from which certification or other tools might flow. Given the highly emotional response that certification has sparked, it would seem preferable to separate the two issues so that the more important area of setting standards could be considered more dispassionately. In this regard, the open-ended process followed by the American Society for Training and Development provides a useful model.

Conclusions

Issues raised by sociologists, historians, and human resource specialists, as well as critical analyses of other occupations, provide useful contexts for considering certification. Common themes emerge: certification is not an isolated activity, but a generic one; "professionalism" is a problematic term that means much more than the striving for greater quality through higher standards; the pursuit of power, territory, and control are central components of professionalism; individual and organizational claims of professional disinterestedness cannot be accepted solely at face

value; and assessing competency is far more complex than measuring technical knowledge.

From these perspectives, the skeptical observer might conclude that certification programs focus more on the interests of the professional associations than on public interests, but it is unlikely that many associations would accept this characterization. When confronted with this criticism, proponents of certification may invoke a language of expertise to suggest that the establishment of the credential is based primarily on the professional desire to ensure standards that reflect the field's specialized knowledge and needs. It is misleading and counterproductive, however, to ignore the role of self-interests, since they may be as much an impetus for certification as the more lofty goals that predominate in a profession's rhetoric as it considers the issue.

One of the more troubling aspects of the process by which archival certification has evolved has been the quality of the debate on the issue. There is a paucity of detailed published statements for and against certification; rather, most accounts have consisted of descriptions of the program and procedures. Arguments on behalf of the program have not moved beyond general statements that certification is a means to establish standards that foster archivists' accountability, responsibility, and competence.[63] Detailed explanations of the steps by which these goals will be reached and consideration of alternative means of reaching the same goals have been lacking. It is even more difficult to locate methodical arguments against certification, except for brief statements of the principle that education—and thus accreditation of educational programs—is a better way to advance archives as a learned profession.[64]

Both a cause and a consequence of the thinness of arguments on both sides is that

[63]"Archival Certification Plan," *SAA Newsletter*, August 1986, 6–9.
[64]"Commentary," *SAA Newsletter*, March 1986, 3, and May 1986, 6–7.

the debate has become quite emotional. This suggests that below the surface there is a complex layering of issues that alternate between sentiment and fact, personal motives, and partial analysis. Regrettably, many archivists have not taken the time to assess these subrational components of their positions. Admittedly, some emotional issues have been mentioned in debates on certification—for example, that many archivists may be afraid of certification because they do not believe they will be able to pass the examination—but there are many other emotional elements that should be acknowledged. For those opposed to certification, these elements may include a sense that the establishment of certification represents a new era in which one's own career path no longer would be adequate to obtain a professional position, and the inference that the educational and experience backgrounds of current archivists are inadequate. For those who support certification, underexplored emotional elements include the feeling that archives are of an unquestionably high social value, the belief that archivists deserve greater recognition and status, and the sense that standards are inherently good. Once archivists identify the emotional components that form part of their positions, they will be better able to

investigate which emotions can be elevated and supported as rational arguments, which ones should be discarded, and which ones must remain as personal convictions. This process will enable the profession to arrive at a better decision on credentialing programs and a clearer understanding of how the process of professionalization relates to the core goals of archival work.

It is hoped that this essay will suggest new directions and analytical tools to use in considering the immediate issue of certification and the ongoing problem of professionalism. For no other reason than that certification is part of a social and economic process that permeates American society, it merits archivists' scholarly attention. Since archivists are particularly aware of the importance of the past and the value of bringing the record of diverse experiences to bear on problems, they should distinguish their profession from others by exploring these issues in greater depth and breadth. They should use the case of their own profession to examine many complex issues that remain to be investigated.[65] If this happens, archivists will be able to assist other professions in understanding the process of professionalization and its fundamental role in twentieth-century American life.

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[65]For example, how much does the age of an occupational specialty determine the sequence of credentialing activities it pursues? How important is the nature of an occupation's work to the status society relegates to it? Do demographic factors, such as the balance of female to male members, influence the status of an occupation? See Jacqueline Goggin, "The Feminization of the Archival Profession: An Analysis of the 1982 Salary Survey as it Pertains to Women," *American Archivist* 47 (1984): 327–30.