

# Who Is This Godot? The Academy of Certified Archivists and Graduate Archival Education

Ashley Todd-Diaz and Alex H. Poole

## ABSTRACT

Since the 1936 founding of the Society of American Archivists, the archival field has struggled with the challenges inhering in professionalization, namely the merits or demerits of institutional or individual accreditation or certification. In 1989, SAA helped establish the Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA), which confers individual certification by written examination. In 1993, ACA modified its bylaws to require graduate education to be eligible for the exam. But, although a relationship clearly exists between certification and education, scholars have not explored, much less profited from, the insights of archival educators. This qualitative case study uses semistructured interviews with thirty-three tenure-track or tenured faculty program directors from graduate archival programs across North America to understand how educators perceive and address certification. Findings reveal that educators are ambivalent about certification, its relationship to graduate education, and its vocational value. The authors discuss the implications of these findings and offer suggestions for research and practice.

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## KEY WORDS

Academy of Certified Archivists; Graduate archival educators;  
Archival education; Professionalism

It is a normal and reasonable expectation that a professional holds certain qualifications and expertise in their given field. The archival field has grappled with the issue of professionalization for more than eight decades through debates about program accreditation and individual certification. William Maher defines the former as the “review and approval” of a program “as meeting the standards of a professional association or governmental program,” whereas the latter is a process in which a professional organization “confers a title on an individual to indicate that he or she has met certain minimum, predefined criteria.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the late 1980s, the Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) has served the role of the professional organization noted in Maher’s definition and has certified archival professionals based on their ability to pass an exam that tests their grasp of field-specific knowledge and skills.<sup>2</sup> To sit for this exam, one must either hold a master’s degree with nine semester hours of graduate archival coursework and one year of practical archival experience, or a master’s degree in any field and two years of practical archival experience. These qualifications suggest a relationship between archival education and archival certification.

In 2015, Mott Linn, then president of ACA, lauded archival certification. He contended, “ACA uses best practices for testing to determine in a valid, reliable, and objective way whether or not somebody has a working mastery of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that archivists need.”<sup>3</sup> Certification confers important professional benefits, Linn argued. “Certified archivists are more strongly connected to the field and are more likely to take part in many archives-related activities, such as attending conferences, holding leadership positions, presenting papers, and taking part in continuing education,” he reported. Furthermore, “a majority of certified archivists have reported benefiting from enhanced respect from their supervisors and . . . many have reported enhanced respect from their peers and the public, as well as improved career opportunities.”<sup>4</sup> Linn even predicted that greater uptake of certification might engender increased public appreciation, institutional support, and pay.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding Linn’s confidence, the literature lacks full-time, tenured and tenure-track archival educators’ perspectives on this topic. Considering the relationship between graduate education and the archival knowledge certification is meant to demonstrate, the absence of educator input could signal a dangerous disconnect between the evolving archival graduate curriculum and professional certification. This article therefore poses the following research question: how do archival educators perceive and address archival certification?

First, we review the literature on professionalization, archival education, and certification. Next, we discuss our methods, which are qualitative and center on a case study. Third, we present our findings, specifically graduate archival educators’ involvement in ACA, mention of certification in their courses, whether they encourage students to pursue certification, alignment between certification and

course content, and employment prospects in terms of certification. We then discuss the implications of these findings for practice and research. Finally, we suggest directions for future work.<sup>6</sup>

## Literature Review

The literature bearing on archival certification deals with professionalization, the relationship between archival education and certification, and the response to and impact of certification in the archival field.

### PROFESSIONALIZATION

A profession not only maintains standards that all practitioners should know, but also has mechanisms of regulation “to exclude the unqualified.”<sup>7</sup> As the archival field developed in the mid-twentieth century, scholars and practitioners debated how to differentiate between those who are archivists and those who are not. By the mid-1960s, the archival field remained a “somewhat marginal profession” due to a lack of “work autonomy, a common core of highly specialized knowledge, entry through controlled higher education, [or] control of the job market.”<sup>8</sup> At this point, formal archival education programs were embryonic, and many practitioners entered the field after completing either a degree program in another discipline and/or an informal apprenticeship.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s, scholars such as Trudy Peterson, Patrick Quinn, and Hugh Taylor encouraged archivists to pursue professionalization both to protect the American public from “incompetent, unscrupulous,”<sup>10</sup> and “unqualified”<sup>11</sup> practitioners and to defend their own bailiwick of professional expertise.

In 1986, Richard Cox applied a sociological lens to archivists’ progress toward professionalism and the challenges they still faced. He emphasized that archivists needed to address their status as a profession and drew attention to several areas for improvement, some of which included strengthening archival education by creating graduate-level programs and developing methods of individual certification and institutional accreditation.<sup>12</sup> These recommendations worked together to reinforce a foundation of archival expertise and proficiency at both an individual and a system level. Cox asserted, “Without certification and accreditation, the public identity of archivists will remain unclear, distinctions between professionals and nonprofessionals will always be uncertain at best, and the continued establishment of inadequate archival programs will continue, threatening the preservation of our documentary heritage.”<sup>13</sup> Cox concluded by reinforcing the relationship between professionalism and social power, urging archivists to follow his recommendations as the best way to advance the archival field.

## ARCHIVAL EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION

During the first half of the twentieth century, archival education almost invariably occurred postappointment.<sup>14</sup> Discussion concerning certification by exam began as early as the 1950s as a vehicle for professionalization that could complement other educational venues.<sup>15</sup> But, even three decades later, William Maher cautioned that very little literature existed “assessing the value of certification programs in general because there are few analytical and comparative studies on the subject.” In other words, it was unclear whether certification had value in archival professionalization.<sup>16</sup>

By the late 1970s, the problem of professionalization remained unresolved. Herman Kahn, Frank Evans, and Andrea Hinding suggested, “We may well find it desirable in the future to adopt minimum certification standards, with appropriate grandfather clauses; and to promote the adoption of training requirements and qualifications for all professional positions.”<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, scholars agreed that some type of standardized training or education program must be put in place to authenticate practitioners, but these standards were wanting.<sup>18</sup> Charging certification proponents of placing the cart before the horse, Maher emphasized that archival standards must logically precede certification methods that would assess and uphold those standards.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Lisa Weber identified archival standards as a key point of disagreement surrounding certification:

Advocates for certification assert that it will create, raise, or make uniform the standards of archival practice, and that it will help to establish criteria for professional accomplishments. Opponents argue that educational standards should be strengthened first; that the program will absorb too many resources; that too few archivists will pursue certification; and that certification is philosophically wrong-headed or excessively technical in nature. Opinions for and against still run strong within the archival community, and much work remains before the concept is fully developed and workable.<sup>20</sup>

Both advocates and opponents of certification thus expressed misgivings about the current state of archival standards. On the one hand, advocates felt that certification would help create, promote, and regulate standards, while on the other, opponents felt that standards needed to be strengthened before resources were dedicated to certification. In short, disagreement about certification ran deep in the field.

The conversations about certification pointed to a more fundamental issue, too, namely what archival training or education should look like and what its relationship to certification should be. In the mid-1970s, Frank Evans raised concerns about the adequacy of training and the cost to both archivists and the archival organizations involved.<sup>21</sup> Drawing parallels to the recently established Institute of Certified Records Managers, in 1977, Peterson, Quinn, and Taylor emphasized the need to develop respected training programs that would prepare individuals

for certification and perhaps even auto-certify anyone who completed the training programs.<sup>22</sup>

More than a decade later, Terry Eastwood asserted that archival graduate programs provide a foundation for professionalization, offering both “a standard means of guaranteeing that every archivist possesses the requisite professional knowledge and a standard setting for dissemination of that knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> In short, scholars acknowledged the synergy between an education or training program and certification. At the same time, they noted that the two were not equivalent qualifications. To this point, Richard Cox contended that certification could strengthen educational preparation, but not substitute for education proper.<sup>24</sup>

### GUIDELINES, ACCREDITATION, AND CERTIFICATION

Even as the need for minimum standards to measure practitioners’ skills and qualifications was discussed, the question of whether those standards should be established at a system level with education programs or at an individual level with certification remained unsettled in the SAA.<sup>25,26</sup> The significance of accreditation was not lost on the archival community, especially considering the rapid development of education programs in the 1960s and early 1970s. But concern persisted that the SAA would be unable to sustain the demands of accreditation and could better serve the profession by promoting education programs and opportunities to its members; facilitating communication between educators via a conference; inviting leaders in the fields of library science, history, and allied disciplines to join SAA’s Committee on Education and Professional Development (CEPD); and supporting intensive study of existing training and education opportunities to identify ways to develop a more comprehensive archival education program.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1970s, SAA’s CEPD edged toward standardization of archival education by creating guidelines for curricula, instructor qualifications, and instructional materials.<sup>28</sup> In 1977, the CEPD released the first version of the *Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs*. The initial guidelines recommended a basic curriculum of at least one year of study covering the nature, acquisition, processing, use, and administration of archives.<sup>29</sup> However, since the guidelines did not provide for program accreditation or approval, program directors were left to implement these recommendations of their own accord.

At the same time as the guidelines’ debut, the CEPD proposed a Board of Archival Certification that would “administer or mandate three types of individual archival certification—through examination, experience (grandfathering), or completion of an accredited program.”<sup>30</sup> However, following concerns from SAA membership relating to the creation of an exam and how to determine eligibility for grandfathering, these options were scrapped. This course of action also supported interest in establishing graduate program accreditation and adoption of the SAA’s

guidelines. SAA leaders continued to debate accreditation over the next decade as leaders worked to build connections with the ALA's Committee on Accreditation and history program accreditation teams, but due to limited resources, only nominal progress was made.<sup>31</sup>

Subsequent archival literature suggested that certification could act as a useful complement to and an assessment tool for archival education.<sup>32</sup> Although program accreditation seemed out of reach, individual certification remained feasible. However, a 1981 SAA membership survey found archivists divided on certification, with just more than half the membership (51.8%) supporting the idea and 37.3% opposing it.<sup>33</sup> A similar survey conducted by the Midwest Archives Conference, by contrast, found only 37% of its members supported certification.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the divided views of the profession, in 1988, the SAA Council approved a certification program, signaling a significant change in the profession's development.<sup>35</sup> William Joyce celebrated, "At long last, archivists are beginning to take the steps necessary to create a community of professional authority and competence, and to commit themselves to developing further graduate level training programs."<sup>36</sup>

The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) was established in 1989 at the SAA's annual meeting as "an independent, nonprofit certifying organization of professional archivists."<sup>37</sup> Its mission is to "support and promote the highest level of professional archival practice," and the organization asserts that it "takes a leadership role by defining the knowledge and abilities necessary to be an archivist."<sup>38</sup>

The development of the exam was led by the SAA-appointed Interim Board for Certification and involved a collaboration between archival practitioners "representing a variety of institutional affiliations and areas of specialization"<sup>39</sup> and an examination development company, Professional Examination Services (PES).<sup>40</sup> In September 1988, a panel of archivists met with PES representatives to evaluate the archival field and develop role delineations and tasks relating to archival practice and knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Those role delineations and tasks were then organized into seven domains and "weighted in terms of importance to the profession" to determine the one hundred multiple-choice questions appearing on the exam.<sup>42</sup> These domains included Selection; Arrangement and Description; Reference and Access; Preservation and Protection; Promotion and Outreach; Program Assessment and Enhancement; and Professional, Ethical, and Legal Issues.

The role delineations have been revised several times by ACA's Examination Development Committee since their development, most recently in 2014;<sup>43</sup> however, the domains have remained largely the same since 1989. The ACA website describes the role delineations as "one of the Academy of Certified Archivists' greatest contributions to the profession,"<sup>44</sup> and former ACA president, James B. Byers, described it as "a clear and concise explanation of the breadth and depth of

the archival profession.”<sup>45</sup> However, the current role delineations do not address emerging priorities in the archival field, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>46</sup> According to ACA president Gerianne Schaad, there are plans to add a new domain focused on cultural competency in the near future.<sup>47</sup>

During the initial certification petition period in 1988–89, an archivist could petition to bypass the exam if they held either a 1) master’s degree in archival administration and five years of experience; 2) a master’s degree in any discipline and six years of experience; or 3) a bachelor’s degree and seven years of archival experience.<sup>48</sup> In 1993, the ACA board voted to change the exam qualifications to phase out the bachelor’s degree option over a six-year period and thus require graduate education to sit for the exam.<sup>49</sup> Certification has thus underscored the necessity of graduate education as indispensable to professionalization. That said, as long as an individual completed the minimum amount of professional archival experience, ACA has not mandated the discipline in which the graduate degree is held.

By creating a central point of assessment, the certification exam potentially encouraged a closer relationship between education programs and the archival community. Susan Davis expressed hope that prospective archival students would select an education program based on its record of graduates passing the ACA exam, thereby motivating programs to align themselves with both the SAA’s education guidelines and the exam content.<sup>50</sup> But it would take time to determine if the certification program would be an effective method of professional quality control. As Cox wrote, “The major issues today are the continued establishment of the certification of individual archivists, the impact of individual certification on education and employment, and the defining or codifying of archival competencies and knowledge for the preparation of certification examinations.”<sup>51</sup> Less charitably, Fred Stielow subsequently charged that the SAA had “neglected . . . internal experts in favor of outside consultants for building a less than satisfactory certification examination.”<sup>52</sup>

## THE RECEPTION OF CERTIFICATION

Following the adoption of certification and the establishment of ACA, several studies assessed the rate of adoption among archivists and employers. In its first year, for example, the ACA certified more than 700 archivists, including 689 by petition and 20 by exam.<sup>53</sup> During the exam’s first two years, a total of 122 individuals sat for the exam and 93 passed. Their average score was an unprepossessing 74.68 (a minimum score of 70 was required to pass).<sup>54</sup> When comparing results of those who held a history degree to those who held an MLS, the former averaged lower scores; Tim Ericson found it disconcerting that those who had completed the recommended amount of archival education did not fare better.<sup>55</sup>



Complementing Diffendal and Ericson, Alan Gabehart's 1992 survey of archival repositories reviewed job postings' mention of certification.<sup>56</sup> Among the 475 responses, which represented 19 types of information organizations and all states but North Dakota, 37.4% ( $n=175$ ) noted that archival certification "probably [would] not have any effect on their hiring practices regarding all archivist positions in general," compared to 5.1% ( $n=24$ ) who noted that it "may be specified as a required qualification in position announcements."<sup>57</sup> Evidently, archival employers had not yet embraced certification as a useful metric. Supporting this assessment, by 1991 only 10% of job postings listed in the SAA's newsletter mentioned certification.<sup>58</sup> This trend, as Gabehart noted, "should be of concern to the Academy of Certified Archivists and to the individuals who may consider certification as a viable option for professional enhancement."<sup>59</sup>

The success of certification depended upon its adoption by the archival community; if employers chose not to prefer (or mandate) certification as a professional qualification, then practitioners would not see the value in becoming certified. While certification numbers peaked in 1994–95 at 939, the following year numbers plummeted to 561.<sup>60</sup> Since then, the number of certified archivists has grown steadily, reaching 1,331 in 2020.<sup>61</sup> Still, this represents only 21.5% of the total membership of the SAA.<sup>62</sup>

Even as the number of certified archivists waxed and waned in the 1990s, the number of job postings promoting certification as a qualification did not increase. Between 1996 and 1997, only 11 of 230 job postings (4.8%) disseminated in the SAA newsletter or email list noted certification as a preference. Hence, Richard Cox characterized certification as "nearly invisible as a requirement."<sup>63</sup> It is unclear whether this was a response to certification specifically or a broader response to the changing nature of archival education. Reflecting on the intention of certification indicating a practitioner's grasp of archival knowledge and practice, Cox stated, "Upon closer examination of the competencies and the education and practice intended to enable someone to gain these competencies, it seems unlikely that an individual can gain the competencies with such modest education and experience as is required for certification."<sup>64</sup> For Cox, then, the bar established for archival certification was misaligned with education and practice; it provided nominal insight into an individual's archival knowledge. Put simply, employers may not have seen the value in requiring certification. Nor, for that matter, did some educators. As James O'Toole wrote in 1997, "most graduates of archival education programs have shown what I take to be a commendable lack of interest in certification."<sup>65</sup>

The trend of employers not investing in certification persisted. Eira Tansey's review of the 943 job postings shared on the SAA's email list between 2006 and 2014 revealed that only 1% of postings required certification and 14% noted it as a preference, with no trend of increased or decreased adoption over time.<sup>66</sup> That 85% of postings did not mention certification shows that certification has not been



adopted by employers, despite Linn's claim that it serves as the "only objective standard that exists to judge the qualifications of prospective archivists."<sup>67</sup> Cox and Larsen framed certification as part of the SAA's tendency to focus merely on "apprenticeship training and lowest common denominator concerns."<sup>68</sup>

In the last three decades, graduate education has become much more common within the archival field. A\*CENSUS findings noted the majority of archivists ages twenty-five to fifty-four had pursued graduate education as their entry point into the archival field, as opposed to self- or postappointment education.<sup>69</sup> According to the findings of A\*CENSUS II, graduate degrees became more prominent in the field since 2004, with a notable 52% increase of MLS/MLIS holders.<sup>70</sup> In 2016, ACA began to preapprove graduate archival courses with the goal of streamlining the ACA exam application process.<sup>71</sup> This program involves educators submitting syllabi for review by ACA, which established a partnership between ACA and archival educators that had not existed in the past. According to the ACA's website, only ten archival programs participate in the course preapproval initiative, suggesting either a lack of communication between educators and ACA, or educators' lack of interest in the initiative.<sup>72</sup>

Ultimately, there is a gap in the recent literature regarding educators' perceptions of archival certification and whether educators are encouraging prospective archivists to value and/or pursue certification. This gap may indicate a dangerous disconnect between two programs that should be working in tandem for the benefit of the archival field, as well as an associated destabilization of the value and role of certification.

## Methods

This study is a qualitative, exploratory case study. To capture archival educators' perceptions of archival certification, we conducted semistructured interviews with 33 tenure-track or tenured archival educators across North America. Participants were identified using purposive sampling by contacting one tenured or tenure-track educator listed as the contact for each of the programs included in the SAA's "Directory of Archival Education" database.<sup>73</sup> Using interview methods and protocols described by Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney, Steinar Kvale, and Svend Brinkmann; and Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, the interviews addressed topics of personal perceptions of ACA, involvement with ACA, and how they incorporate information about ACA into their courses.<sup>74</sup> The semistructured interview protocol included a list of open-ended questions, but allowed the researcher the flexibility to react to each participant's unique responses.<sup>75</sup>

The interviews were conducted between December 2020 and July 2021 via Zoom. On average, each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes. Each

interview was conducted and recorded with Zoom software.<sup>76</sup> The recordings were initially transcribed by Zoom and were then reviewed for accuracy by the researchers prior to the process of coding and thematic analysis.<sup>77</sup> The coding process was iterative, progressing from open coding that identified a broad range of themes emerging from the data, to focused analysis that merged related themes and recognized recurring patterns to arrive at a final set of themes.<sup>78</sup> NVivo software aided the research team's efficiency during coding and analysis.<sup>79</sup> In service of trustworthiness, we employed documentary evidence to complement our interview data.<sup>80</sup>

## Findings

Participants talked about personal involvement in ACA, discussing of certification in courses, encouraging students to pursue certification, the alignment between coursework and the exam, and perception of certification in relation to the archival job market.

### INVOLVEMENT IN ACA

For respondents, involvement in ACA was exceptional. A handful of participants were certified archivists (P7, P13, P22, P32), and P13 and P22 had at one time been part of ACA's leadership. P12 and P23 meanwhile expressed interest in becoming involved with ACA, the latter specifically noting that they were interested in offering students more information about the organization.

The majority ( $n=17$ ; P8, P10, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19, P20, P21, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28, P31, P33) were not involved with ACA. One respondent noted they were ineligible for certification due to a lack of practical experience (P28), and another (P6) said they were once certified but no longer approve of it. Additionally, two respondents (P20, P29) claimed they were only vaguely familiar with ACA, and one respondent (P30) conceded that they were not familiar with ACA at all.

### *Incorporation in courses*

Fifteen participants ( $n=15$ ; P2, P5, P7, P8, P10, P11, P17, P19, P22, P23, P26, P28, P29, P31, P32) mention certification in their courses. They do so in a variety of ways. Some offered the frequency of how often they discuss certification, while others expanded on how they frame the conversation regarding certification. Two respondents (P8, P23) mention certification every semester; others discuss it in specific courses (P10, P12, P14, P26). Some educators provide basic information, such as what certification is and how ACA functions (P28), the benefits and limitations of becoming a certified archivist (P17), and how certification relates

to professionalization (P5). Two respondents (P7, P31) introduce certification by posing sample exam questions in class to gauge students' knowledge. Additionally, P12 was planning to mention certification, but noted it was not something with which they had personal experience.

Alternatively, four respondents (P4, P14, P18, P21) do not mention certification to students. Reflecting on the establishment of ACA, P4 noted, "I thought it was the primary thing that would undermine archival programs. I thought it was a bad thing. I have never mentioned it to my students and the couple of times that they have asked me, 'do you think it is useful?' I said no." Certification is not a topic that comes up in P18's classes; perhaps surprisingly, they do not see connections between the courses they teach and the ACA domains of archival knowledge. Finally, P1 reflected that, in the last six years, only one student affiliated with their program sat for the ACA exam, and that individual did so independently.

## ENCOURAGED OR NOT

While mentioning certification to students in a course is one thing, encouraging or discouraging them to pursue it is a different matter. Similar numbers of educators noted that they try to remain neutral on the topic ( $n=5$ ) as those who encourage certification ( $n=6$ ).

Of the educators who encourage certification (P3, P5, P13, P19, P23, P32), half (P3, P23, P32) broadly recommend this qualification. For P32, certification offers a way to "open doors . . . if they're going to progress through the archival ranks . . . it's critical for them to become a certified archivist." Other educators encourage students who hold specific career goals. For example, P5 noted that students interested in certain sectors may benefit more from becoming certified, and P19 thought certification valuable if students are pursuing a job in government or corporate archives. By contrast, P13 and their colleagues spur students to pursue certification by exemplifying this practice and showing their investment in it. "Most of us have one or two certifications ourselves trying to model for students. We think it's important enough for us to go through that process, and so you should too."

Only one respondent does not encourage students to pursue certification. P33 noted, "if there is a cost [it] doesn't seem right." For this educator, the required financial outlay is ethically dubious.

## CONTENT AND CURRICULUM

Several respondents discussed the relationship between their programs' curriculum and ACA exam content. Responses ranged from indifference to overlap, from active efforts to align curricula to the exam to interest in better supporting

students who plan to pursue certification. On one end of this spectrum, P14 was unaware of the relationship between the exam's content and their program's curriculum. Similarly disengaged, P11 lacked space in their curriculum to cover everything on the exam.

On the other end of the spectrum, 5 respondents (P3, P15, P16, P25, P29) undertake a variety of approaches to align their curricula with the exam. P25 intentionally shapes their courses to include content covered by the certification exam to prepare their students. P29 has been considering what more their program could do to better support students interested in certification, such as develop a special topics course concentrating on ACA's recommended readings list. Two respondents (P16, P25) feature certified archivists or members of ACA as guest speakers. Another respondent (P3) shared that not only is their program's curriculum closely aligned with ACA's domains, but they also have a "capstone course that is partially like 'let's finish up and talk about different things and get you ready to take a comprehensive exam,' but secretly it's to get them ready to secretly—not so secretly—take the certified archivist exam." Finally, P15 stated that since their program does not offer an MLS, certification is the only nationally recognized acknowledgment of archival skills and knowledge that their students can achieve. Due to this, they take careful note of ACA's domain content when refining their curriculum.

## JOB MARKET

Several respondents addressed the relationship between archival certification and the job market. Responses were equally split between perceived benefits and drawbacks of pursuing certification ( $n=5$ , respectively). Four educators (P5, P17, P18, P19) noted that certification may be more valuable in certain regions of the country or markets, such as corporate or government archives. One respondent (P19) tells students:

Don't do it unless you think . . . you really want to go into those areas of government or corporate archives where it's required; then it makes sense. Then there's sort of an incentive, rather than just getting this certification and [finding] out you want to work at archives in public libraries and they don't care at all about that certification.

Certification's benefits, in other words, may not be the same for all archivists. This contrasts with P12's perception that certification is broadly beneficial as "something you put on your resume. And it's an additional thing that potential employers will see and will take note of."

Respondents also expressed some misgivings regarding the value of certification in the job market. P32 shared concerns that some employers may have a negative view of certification. They noted:

[Certification] can give you an extra advantage as long as you're not applying to somebody who's violently against certification.

Suffice it to say that certification may remain a somewhat polarizing professional issue.

Other respondents (P7, P17, P18, P32) did not view certification as useful in securing an archival job. P18 stated, "keeping an eye on job postings, or hearing anecdotally about job interviews, I get the sense that it's certainly not essential." Along the same lines, P14 expressed concern that certification suggests to students that their graduate degree is not sufficient to secure a professional position. One respondent (P27) found education a better route to employment than certification. "One needs education to get into the profession. . . . I don't see that ACA has been very influential in job postings. It's really the graduate degree . . . that's the better route." In other words, an archivist's formal education, not the accreditation process, is the foundation of their professional skills and knowledge.

Personal involvement with ACA, incorporation in courses, encouraging ACA or not, content and curriculum, and job market—interviewees addressed each of these topics, and, in many cases, little consensus was obtained.

## Discussion

Archival certification was established in 1989 as a method purportedly for ensuring the quality and knowledge of archival professionals.<sup>81</sup> Although graduate education has always been a prerequisite for taking the certification exam, the literature from the last few decades is largely mum on educators' views of certification. Consistent themes in this study included divided perceptions of certification, its relationship to education, and its future value to the field.

### SPLIT PERCEPTIONS OF CERTIFICATION

Educators were, at best, ambivalent about archival certification. Indicating a positive view of certification, a few respondents (18%) were either personally certified or involved with ACA leadership. However, the majority of educators (51.5%) were neither certified nor involved with ACA, and several (12%) did not even mention, let alone endorse, certification as part of their teaching. This divided perspective aligns with the findings of the 1987 survey of SAA membership.<sup>82</sup> A review of ACA board members from 1989 to the present reveals that only five educators have served in a leadership capacity across the organization's tenure; two as president (1989–1990 and 1999–2020), one as regent for exam administration (1999–2001), one as regent for exam development (2018–2020), and one as regent for outreach (2020–2022).<sup>83</sup> The fact that two of these educators have

served within the last five years may suggest a trend of educators becoming more involved with certification.

Aside from the relative paucity of evidence that certification boosts new professionals' employment prospects, the cost of earning and subsequently maintaining certification is not trivial. Since a graduate degree is an exam prerequisite, prospective certified archivists will have already invested in tuition and living expenses. They must then absorb the \$80 application and examination fees to sit for the exam, the \$75 certification fee after successfully passing the exam, and ongoing annual dues of \$75.<sup>84</sup> Promoting certification to students is thus an ethical problem for some educators that can be viewed as an exclusionary practice that privileges those in the field who can afford the ongoing financial commitment of certification. One solution to mitigate the expense to members may be to integrate it with the SAA's membership so members would receive more resources and benefits for their fees while also streamlining the oversight and expense of certification.

The ACA's *Handbook for Archival Certification* characterizes certified archivists as practitioners, thus implying that archival educators are not ACA's target audience.<sup>85</sup> It is therefore not surprising that educators may not be involved with or invested in ACA, may not have pursued certification themselves, and may hold a very different perspective on the benefits of certification than Linn does.<sup>86</sup> However, archival educators work most directly with students and new professionals, so their perceptions of certification or the decision to mention certification may greatly influence aspiring archivists. Similarly, if senior faculty fail to encourage future faculty to embrace ACA, the likelihood of certification gaining a greater foothold on education is decreased. Since most of the responses provided by educators are not based on their personal experience with ACA, however, there is potential to build meaningful partnerships between ACA and educators. Regular, structured communication venues are a good step.

## EDUCATION AND CERTIFICATION

The ACA's Exam Development Committee represents various institutions, subject expertise, and regions, though it is unclear if any educators serve on the committee.<sup>87</sup> In the history of the organization, only one educator has served as the regent for exam development. A lack of educator involvement undercuts the possibility of alignment between exam content and archival curricula; it also suggests a troubling larger question: is the hundred-question, multiple-choice exam a reliable measure of current archival knowledge and abilities, as ACA claims?<sup>88</sup> If it is, why are educators ignoring it? Without greater involvement with or input from the ACA, educators remain unaware of how certification might be leveraged or enhanced to facilitate professionalization.

With many educators scarcely aware of or less than impressed with ACA, it is not surprising that more interest does not exist in allocating class time to discussing certification. A stronger partnership between educators and ACA would improve the alignment of education and certification. Increasing communication with educators surrounding the Course Preapproval Program<sup>89</sup> and the Exam Development Committee<sup>90</sup> suggests opportunities to build this partnership. In this spirit, practitioner-educators, who have a foot in both camps, could serve as a conduit to draw the two groups together.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, establishing a joint task force between SAA, ACA, and the Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI) would provide a structure for practitioners and educators to engage in meaningful discussion and review of content included on the exam and the value of certification more broadly.

Multiple interviewees suggest that certification sits uneasily alongside graduate archival education. Certification might undermine education programs, be viewed as an alternative to education rather than a complement to it, or suggest to students that their education credentials are not sufficient to enter the archival field. The vast majority of the archival programs listed in the SAA's Directory of Archival Education are nested in ALA-accredited library and information science graduate programs.<sup>92</sup> Students who graduate with degrees from those programs hold a nationally recognized qualification. In such cases, there may be less reason to pursue certification, especially given its expense.

For non-ALA-accredited graduate archival programs (e.g., those in history departments), the view of individual certification as a nationally recognized qualification is understandable. ACA's flexible eligibility requirements could help diversify the archival field by bringing in professionals with a variety of backgrounds, including those outside the bounds of the ALA's purview, but may be reviewed by other accrediting bodies. The educational background of archivists is varied;<sup>93</sup> Matt Francis's 2015 study of new archival professionals found that 17.1% of respondents received a degree other than an MLS/MLIS or an MA in history.<sup>94</sup> According to ACA president Schaad, there has been a trend of more people choosing the eligibility option that does not require archival education credits; however, she mentioned the caveat that ACA has not historically tracked this data point.<sup>95</sup> Rather than serving as a gatekeeping mechanism, then, certification might open new pathways into the archival field for professionals who have practical archival experience but do not hold an ALA-accredited master's degree.<sup>96</sup> Conversely, certification's sanctioning more diverse educational backgrounds might dilute the value of formal graduate archival education. Again, the need for dialogue among stakeholders cannot be overstated.



## THE FUTURE OF CERTIFICATION

Although the number of certified archivists has gradually increased since 1994, reaching a record high of 1,331 in 2020, they represent but a fraction of the SAA's 6,200 members.<sup>97</sup> According to ACA president Schaad, membership numbers have increased over the last five years by roughly a hundred each year, though this is balanced by members who decide not to renew. The two years during the pandemic saw repeated lapses of approximately 130 members, though the two years prior experienced a more modest annual lapse of thirty-five members.<sup>98</sup> The unprecedented impact of the pandemic, paired with limited historical membership data, prevents a deeper review of decisions to become a certified archivist and/or renew. However, the fact that membership numbers have only been increasing annually by an average of twenty-seven members since 2012<sup>99</sup> suggests that new members are only slightly eclipsing those deciding not to renew. Moreover, if less than half of archival educators are even mentioning certification to their students, let alone promoting it, then certification numbers will likely remain low, and the argument for certification as a measure of archival knowledge and ability will remain unsubstantiated.

In 1988, Maher expressed skepticism about the merits of certification.<sup>100</sup> More than a quarter century later, Linn argued for the broader benefits of certification. That educators and employers have a very different perception of certification from ACA's proponents, however, is troubling indeed. More investment and study in this area is needed to establish a stronger assessment of the value of certification.

Although certification was developed to promote the professionalization and quality of working archivists, its checkered record suggests the need to explore whether the field still needs certification. In 2006, for example, the majority of archivists aged twenty-five to fifty-four noted that they pursued graduate education as a pathway into the archival field.<sup>101</sup> The importance of graduate education was further supported by Francis's 2015 study. More than two-thirds (67.4%) of respondents had received an MLS or an MLIS degree, 8.5% had received a dual MLS/MA degree, and 6.6% had received an MA in history.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, the field's professionalization mechanisms have shifted significantly over time; A\*CENSUS II will provide useful data on this point. Though some interviewees expressed concern that some benefits to certification, including enhanced qualifications and potential upward mobility, may only be recognized in some sectors of the archival field.

## Conclusion

ACA has always required graduate education as a prerequisite for taking the exam. However, most full-time graduate archival educators across North America neither hold personal certification nor are involved with ACA, suggesting a

dangerous disconnect between what archivists are learning in the classroom and the knowledge needed to pass the certification exam. Additionally, educators' low opinion of the value of this qualification, both in terms of professional benefit and cost, prevents many of them from discussing certification in their courses, adapting their curricula to reflect exam content, or encouraging students to pursue certification.

Considering that certification was established decades ago when there was a different need to professionalize the field and to discern between qualified and unqualified archivists, it is possible that the archival community is ready to view certification in relation to education in a new way or perhaps accept that the field has outgrown the need for certification. Establishing a joint task force that draws together SAA, ACA, and AERI representatives to review the current certification program, to discuss what constitutes core knowledge in the field, and to assess whether a standardized exam is the ideal method of evaluating archival expertise would allow communication and cross-fertilization of ideas and proposals between practitioners and educators. This task force would provide a dedicated forum to explore what it would look like to, on the one hand, abandon certification, or on the other, invest in it. To date, very limited evidence has demonstrated the individual, professional, or financial value of certification, and, as a result, there is scanty interest from new professionals, employers, or educators to invest in this qualification. However, in an age of micro-credentials, the potential exists to re-envision certification to complement rather than to challenge education, to enhance the currency of this qualification so it is widely recognized, and to increase its ability to welcome qualified practitioners of diverse educational backgrounds into the archival community.

Ultimately, more exploration of the current value and role of certification is needed. This study illuminated several opportunities for further research to establish a deeper understanding of the relationship between archival education and certification, as well as the broader perceptions of certification within the field. First, this study focused on full-time archival educators, though it is possible that the findings regarding educator perceptions of certification would be different among practitioner adjuncts who are reputedly more closely aligned with archival practice. Second, further research is needed regarding the perceptions of certification among students and new archival practitioners. If the majority of new archivists are entering the field with graduate degrees, it is important to consider their perceptions of personal and community benefits of individual certification and whether they plan to pursue certification.

After more than thirty years, certification has riven the archival field. However, despite this disparity, it is an established qualification, and it is up to educators, practitioners, and employers together to either invest in it or to accept the polarized perceptions and relegate it to the sidelines.<sup>103</sup>

## NOTES

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- <sup>5</sup> Linn, "Not Waiting for Godot," 125.
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Ashley Todd-Diaz**, PhD, is assistant university librarian for Special Collections and University Archives at Towson University. Her research interests are libraries and archives as organizations, graduate archival education, archival identity, and archival literacy. She teaches as an adjunct in Drexel University's College of Computing and Informatics and Emporia State University's School of Library and Information Management.



**Alex H. Poole** is an associate professor at Drexel University's College of Computing and Informatics. He studies archives and records management; diversity, equity, and inclusion; social justice; digital curation; and digital humanities. Poole has received the Donald G. Davis Article Award from the American Library Association (ALA), the Justin Winsor Library History Essay Award from ALA, the Jesse H. Sherer Award for Distinguished Published Research from ALA, the Bob Williams History Fund Best Research Paper Award from the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), the Arline Custer Memorial Award for Best Article from the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC), and the Theodore Calvin Pease Award from the Society of American Archivists (SAA). He was educated at Williams College, Brown University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.