



New Pathways to Membership Task Force Final Report

In February 2024, the Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) Board established the New Pathways to Membership Task Force (NPTF). The purpose of this task force is to examine, develop, and provide recommendations for applicants to qualify for the ACA exam and obtain Certified Archivist status.

From August to October 2024, the NPTF met monthly to explore alternative pathways for qualifying to take the exam and to create new opportunities for cultural heritage professionals and practicing archivists to join the Academy of Certified Archivists.

The task force consisted of individuals representing a diverse range of ACA Board members and community subject matter experts. Members served as consultants and advisors, providing valuable insights and recommendations. The Task Force Chair also invited community members, with approval from the ACA Board, to contribute their expertise. The final list of task force members is as follows:

Dr. April Anderson-Zorn, CA; Terry Baxter, CA; Dr. Lara Godbille, CA; Dr. Ashley Todd-Diaz, CA; Dara Baker, CA (ACA President 2024-2025); Stephanie Bayless, CA (ACA Vice President, 2024-2025); Gina Nichols, CA (Regent for Exam Administration, 2023-2027).

Ex-officio Members: Mary McRobinson, CA (ACA Treasurer, 2022-2026); Lauren Goodley, CA (ACA Secretary, 2023-2025); Amanda Focke, CA (ACA Regent for Certification Maintenance 2023-2026); Cheryl Oestreicher, CA (ACA Regent for Exam Development, 2022-2026); Julia Stringfellow, CA (ACA Regent for Member Services, 2023-2025); Liz Scott, CA (ACA Past-President, 2024-2025); Dina Mazina, CA (ACA Regent for Outreach, 2024-2026).

BACKGROUND

The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) is an independent, nonprofit organization that certifies professional archivists. It was founded during the 1989 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists. Initially, the ACA enabled archivists to gain certification by meeting specific professional standards. Archivists could either qualify by petitioning or by passing an examination, which was first offered in September 1989.

Initially, a candidate was eligible to sit for the examination if they had:

1. A master's degree that included a minimum of nine semester-hours of graduate archival education and a minimum of one year's qualifying professional archival experience
2. Any master's degree with two years of qualifying professional archival experience
3. A bachelor's degree and three years of qualifying professional archival experience

During the ACA Board meeting in May 1993, the Examination Qualification Task Force reviewed a proposal to connect certification with archival education, specifically concerning the qualifications required to take the certification exam. The two primary outcomes included:

1. Create a Provisional certification option (for those without qualifying experience);
2. Plan to phase out the option to qualify to sit for the exam with a bachelor's degree and three years of qualifying professional archival experience by 1999.

At the April 1995 meeting, the ACA Board voted to implement a minimum qualification of a master's degree for the 1999 exam, in support of the professionalization of archivists. They also decided to end "legacy membership," which allowed individuals with bachelor's degrees to take the exam. This change was initially scheduled to take effect in 1998 but would be fully implemented by 2005, at which point all applicants would be required to hold a master's degree. At that time, the Board believed that requiring this additional degree would ensure that members had the necessary education and experience to lead the profession into the next millennium. The Board also anticipated that master's programs in Archival Science (or equivalent) would become more common. Still, they did not foresee the significant increase in education costs compared to salaries in the field.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of revising the exam requirements has been a frequent subject of discussion among the ACA Board and its members for many years. In the fall of 2023, the ACA Board began discussions about creating new pathways to become a Certified Archivist (CA). This initiative was prompted by several critical articles, member complaints, and feedback from candidates that had been voiced over the years.

Currently, the pathways restrict archivists without a master's degree from taking the exam. Feedback received from some archivists indicated that success in the field does not necessarily require a master's degree, and many stated that obtaining the CA designation is unrelated to their professional achievements. By making the master's degree a prerequisite for exam qualification, the ACA has inadvertently marginalized a segment of the archival community. The CA should serve as a valuable tool for archivists to enhance their professional success, not as an additional barrier that restricts achievement due to financial or social constraints.

There are growing discussions within the community about issues related to pay, hiring status, and whether the CA designation helps our members stand out compared to other applicants and enhances their qualifications. The cost of obtaining a master's degree and the potential earnings have led some archivists to delay pursuing an advanced degree or to choose alternative careers that offer full-time positions, adequate compensation, opportunities for advancement, and benefits. The Board has acknowledged these concerns and initiated discussions on how to enhance connections with archivists and support those who feel disenfranchised or dissatisfied.

Archivists enter the field through various pathways, and many did not initially consider it as a career option. Some may have begun with the goal of becoming librarians or researchers, often coming from related graduate programs, regardless of whether they specialized in archives. Others have entered the profession through the military, as paraprofessionals, or as "accidental archivists"—

those who stumbled into the role through collateral duties or gained experience after high school, through college work-study programs, or following retirement from other careers. The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA) acknowledges that the archival profession has evolved since 2005. The requirement for a master's degree creates an uneven economic burden on those who wish to enter the field, particularly for individuals who are underrepresented in the profession.

To better connect with and serve the entire archival community, the ACA Board established the New Pathways to Membership Task Force during the ACA Mid-Winter meeting in February 2024.

DIRECTIONS TOWARD REFORM

The ACA Board acknowledges that the current requirements to become a Certified Archivist (CA) have alienated some segments of the archival community. The NPTF received background information and an explanation of why its members are exploring alternative pathways to take the certification exam.

Importantly, the ACA exam will maintain the same rigorous professional standards, regardless of any changes to the pathways or processes for obtaining CA certification. Recently, the ACA conducted a job analysis that thoroughly reviewed all knowledge statements and tasks, gathering input from archivists in the field. The Examination Development Committee continuously updates, reviews, and creates new exam questions to ensure they reflect the latest theories and practices in archival science.

These updates to the exam procedures are part of the ACA's ongoing commitment, spanning over 35 years, to align the exam with current archival practices. A recent significant development includes the successful adoption and implementation of the Cultural Competency Domain (Domain 8), an initiative led by CAs Helen Wong Smith and Rebecca Hankins, along with ACA Presidents Gerianne Schaad and Tomaro Taylor.

The NPTF assessed similar organizations to compare their qualification requirements for exam eligibility. Among those reviewed, the ACA is unique in that it requires candidates to have a master's degree in addition to a bachelor's degree, relevant coursework, and/or professional experience. In contrast, other certification programs generally require only a bachelor's degree and/or experience, allow candidates to work toward an advanced degree along with additional experience, or have no specific requirements to sit for the examination.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations emphasize being a CA within the profession, rather than merely being eligible to sit for the exam. Being a CA involves three pillars:

1. Education and Knowledge (pass the exam)
2. Community (Active membership and participation)
3. Continued Engagement and Growth (Recertification and professional involvement)

The NPTF and ACA board members discussed various qualification scenarios, including sliding scales, new requirements that combine years of experience and/or non-degree training, removing all

barriers, and setting specific requirements. After a lengthy discussion regarding the advantages and disadvantages of each scenario and their potential impacts on the ACA and the community, the Task Force voted unanimously 7-0 in favor of simplifying the current qualification requirements to become a CA. The qualification process for the exam will be simplified to provide a single option accessible to everyone.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, revising the qualifications for the ACA exam will better serve and support the entire archival community. This aligns with our mission to provide independent verification of archival knowledge, skills, and abilities through examination and recertification processes, benefiting archivists, the profession, and its stakeholders. We have achieved a key goal of the task force by making the ACA more inclusive and accessible to the archival community, while also eliminating requirements that create uneven economic pressures on individuals seeking to enter or remain in the profession.

The ACA will remove the previous pathways and reimagine the CA designation as a valuable benefit for the entire archival community, usable throughout one's career and beyond. Those who pursue careers in the archival profession bring diverse experiences and perspectives. The ACA is committed to embracing this diversity in education, experience, archival practice, and identity through a new, unencumbered pathway to membership. Essentially, we will leverage the strength of our community and our examination process for a better future and invite everyone to join us.

Appendix A

	Education – Degree	Experience – Years in field	Professional Education
Certified Records Manager; and Certified Records Analyst	<p>BA; or</p> <p>3 years of college OR</p> <p>2 years of college OR</p> <p>1 year college OR</p> <p>High School Diploma or GED</p>	<p>One year of professional experience</p> <p>PLUS two years of professional-level RIM experience</p> <p>PLUS three years of professional-level RIM experience</p> <p>PLUS four years of professional-level RIM experience</p> <p>PLUS five years of professional-level RIM experience</p>	Not required.
Project Management	<p>BA</p> <p>High school diploma</p>	<p>3 years' experience within the last 8 years</p> <p>60 months of experience leading projects in the last 8 years</p>	<p>35 hours of PM education</p> <p>35 hours of PM education</p>
Information Governance Professional	None required – study for the exam		

Business Analyst	None required – study for the exam		
Certified Information Privacy Professional	None required – study for the exam		
Information Governance professional	None required – study for the exam		