



Take Back the SAA

Member-Led Organizing and Action in the Wake of #SAA2019

Awesome Small Working Group

ASWG is a collective of archaeologists consisting of, in alphabetical order, Valerie Bondura (Columbia University / @ValerieBondura), Christyann Darwent (University of California, Davis / @CMDarwent), Stephanie Halmhofer (Independent / @Bones_Canada), Annalisa Heppner (Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University / @NorthernSirena), Kristina Killgrove (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill / @DrKillgrove), Hanna Marie Pageau (Independent / @TinySapien), Jolene Smith (Virginia Department of Historic Resources / @aejolene), Kisha Supernant (University of Alberta / @ArchaeoMapper), and Heather Walder (University of Wisconsin, La Crosse / @HeatherWalder).

On Thursday, April 11, 2019, the second day of the 84th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Albuquerque, New Mexico, some SAA members in attendance noted the presence of David Yesner, a former archaeology professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). Yesner was the subject of a Title IX investigation by UAA that determined there were at least nine credible allegations of sexual assault, harassment, discrimination, and exploitation against him. An investigation started in December 2017 was publicized on March 25, 2019, by KTVA (Rivera 2019a), a television station in Anchorage. On April 8, KTVA described how UAA had banned Yesner from campus (Rivera 2019b). In spite of these well-publicized sanctions, Yesner was able to register for the SAA conference in person on-site on April 11, and archaeologists in attendance who had been participants in the Title IX case were shocked to see him. Word quickly spread, particularly on social media, through the archaeological community about the presence of a sanctioned abuser at the conference and the concerns of his former targets, and the ensuing events came to define the conference. The social media hashtag #SAA2019 came to represent both a practical means of following unfolding events and complaints online in real time as well as a shorthand to refer to the events themselves.

As a result of the handling of #SAA2019 and the media firestorm that ensued,¹ the authors of this article came together to discuss what a committed group of SAA members could do in response to issues raised by students, faculty, and the archaeological public at large. We nicknamed ourselves the Awesome Small Working Group (ASWG).² This article outlines what happened, how we are seeking to effect change within the SAA, and why we believe that the SAA should recommit itself to being a member-led organization.

I. #SAA2019

Events related to #SAA2019 largely occurred in two waves and were recorded in real time through social media.³ First was the reaction from SAA members and the archaeological community

during the conference itself (April 11–15). Word of the presence of a known harasser spread quickly through Twitter and Facebook, with several requests addressed to the SAA to revoke his registration. On April 11, several members, including several Title IX complainants, attempted to meet with SAA organizers regarding Yesner's attendance, resulting in the filing of official complaints about his presence at the conference. One conference attendee took it upon himself to escort Yesner from the conference, which led to that attendee's expulsion from the conference on April 12, while Yesner was still in attendance. Outrage from SAA members continued to grow dramatically, both in person and online. Figure 1 represents all tweets using the #SAA2019 Twitter hashtag that were published during the month of April and subjected to a sentiment analysis, in which green and yellow dots suggest more positive engagement while orange and red dots suggest more negative sentiments. This graph illustrates a sizeable increase in members using Twitter to express negative sentiments about the SAA 2019 annual meeting in the weeks following the conference, providing a visualization of both the intensity of members' outrage and the clear drop in positive sentiment that continues at least through the end of April.

In other examples, Stephanie Halmhofer and others interrupted their sessions to highlight the situation and ask that members in attendance press the SAA Board and staff for action. At the annual business meeting on April 12, outgoing SAA president Susan Chandler was asked for commentary on the situation but suggested that due to privacy concerns, public comment was not possible at that time. Many members left the business meeting and subsequent committee meetings in which #SAA2019 was addressed with the impression that the SAA's outgoing leadership believed that the burden of reporting, and therefore the burden of keeping members safe from sharing conference spaces with individuals found responsible for harassment and assault, fell primarily to survivors. It was suggested that the organization at the time was legally and ethically constrained in its ability to address any situation that was not reported, evidenced, and advised on by the original direct complainants in an investigation, a suggestion

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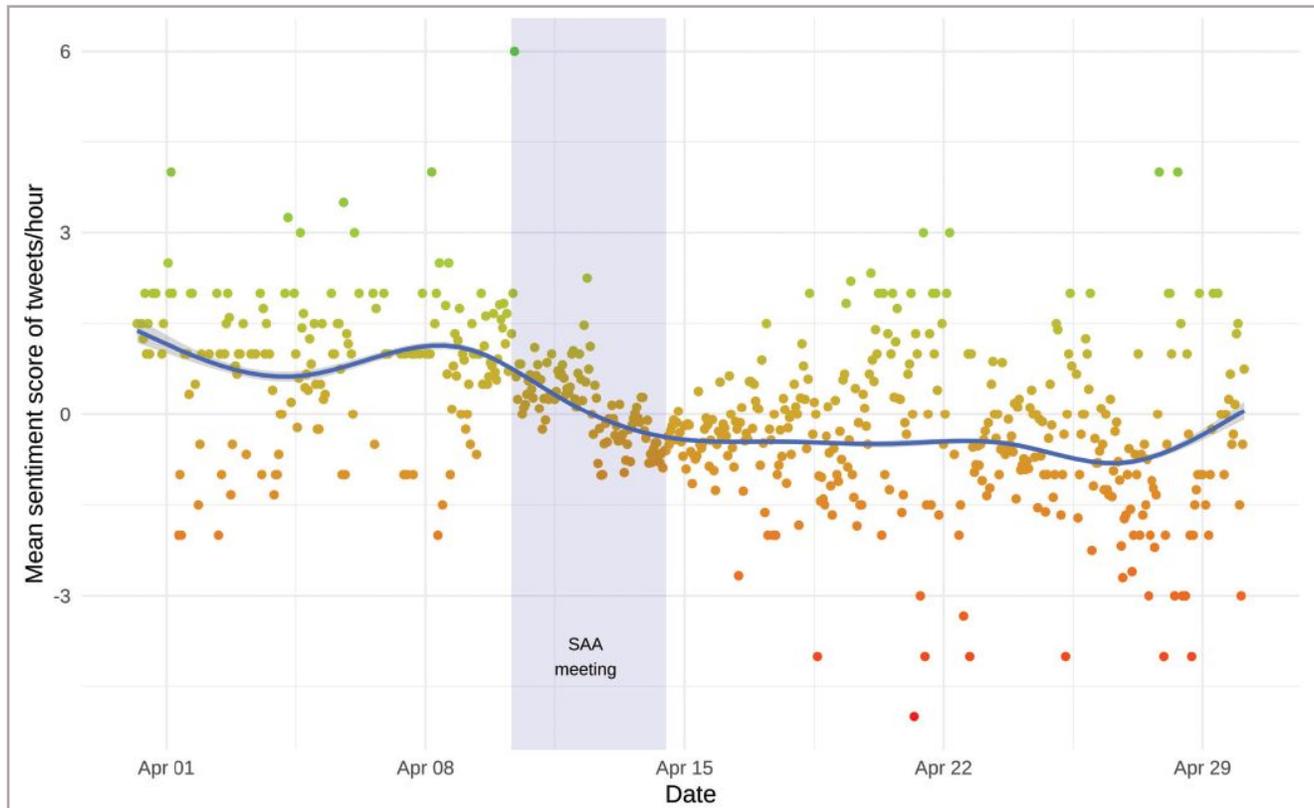


Figure 1. Sentiment analysis of tweets containing the #saa2019 (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23saa2019>) hashtag posted during March and April of 2019. Sentiment gradually trends upward (green and yellow) before the meeting, followed by a steep decline (orange and red) during the meeting. After the meeting there is very high variance in sentiment. Figure prepared by Jolene Smith. Code and data derived from prior work by Ben Marwick, available at <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/4CRH8> and <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VCKTS>.

that many members found concerning in light of the substantial emotional and professional labor involved in asking survivors to bear responsibility for holding others accountable.

The second wave of the #SAA2019 response followed the erratic reactions of SAA staff and incoming SAA president Joe Watkins to members and non-members over social media and e-mail following the conference. Following SAA's published statement on April 17 (SAA 2019), in which SAA stated that it only received official complaints starting on April 12, sentiment soured. Tweets and e-mails from the SAA staff, president, and a newly hired crisis public relations manager⁴ regarding #SAA2019 then began to use what many have described as "gaslighting" and "victim-blaming" language (Figure 2).

Most of these tweets were deleted following immediate backlash to the contents from members and, in the case of Figure 2, in response to a complaint from UAA's lawyers. Some Twitter

users, including Kristina Killgrove and Hanna Marie Pageau, were blocked by @SAAorg; they were not given a reason, but President Watkins has referred repeatedly to the "uncivil" nature of discourse on social media. A handful of members reported receiving a semi-personalized e-mail from President Watkins on April 24 asking for their input on #SAA2019, but it was not until April 30 that an e-mail regarding #SAA2019 was sent to the entire SAA membership. That e-mail and video were posted at www.SAA.org on May 2 and outline a six-point plan that includes additional training for staff and SAA members in sexual harassment and a promise of more open dialogue going forward.⁵

Because of our collective disappointment with the inadequacy and torpidity of the SAA's response to #SAA2019, we formed the Awesome Small Working Group (ASWG) shortly after the conference concluded. Having seen half a dozen other organizations, such as the Canadian Archaeological Association, Society for Historical Archaeology, Archaeological Institute of America/

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Society for Classical Studies, American Association of Physical Anthropologists, and Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA), specifically address #SAA2019 in e-mails to their membership and reinforce their policies and bylaws surrounding harassment in the immediate weeks following the April conference, we decided to pursue member-led action to bring the SAA in line with these other organizations.

II. Member-Led Action Using Social Media in Response to #SAA2019

Social media is a collaborative tool with benefits that differ from other forms of communication. In particular, social media allows for (1) increased access to participation; (2) the protection of those in contingent or vulnerable positions when engaging in collective action; (3) agility, letting people connect and respond in real time as well as asynchronously to produce action quickly; and (4) information sharing and transparency.

Social media was therefore a crucial tool for #SAA2019 attendees to connect with others who shared their concerns and wished to take action. Because official communiques from the SAA were slow,⁶ conference-goers not active on social media were less likely to be aware of the incident or to participate in at-conference actions, such as interrupting their sessions or bringing complaints. The SAA's organizational failure to provide swift and transparent communications during the conference reflected a reproduction of existing hierarchies within professional archaeology, in that most of the complaints filed and discussions that were raised originated with securely employed or well-networked archaeologists and those with professional service experience. By using the #SAA2019 hashtag to identify shared concerns, a broader swath of SAA members were able to organically connect in order to take collective action. #SAA2019 therefore facilitated coalition-building in a more equitable way than would have been possible by relying on personal and professional networks alone.

Social media also facilitated the protection of member-advocates in precarious professional and personal positions. As Sara Ahmed's work "Why Complain?" makes clear, those in vulnerable positions are often made more vulnerable through complaint.⁷ But the reason for complaint weighs heavily against this risk, especially when that complaint relates to the safety of all individuals who make up an organization. Ahmed writes, "*You have to record what you do not want to reproduce*" (italics in original). With #SAA2019, social media became both the means for recording what members did not want to reproduce—namely, the specific events of the conference as well as related cultures of misconduct, harassment, assault, and institutional negligence—and also a means for distributing the risk of complaint by allowing members to create ad hoc collectives.

ASWG was formed within the span of a few days in late April over Twitter, initially over a shared concern about the inadequacy

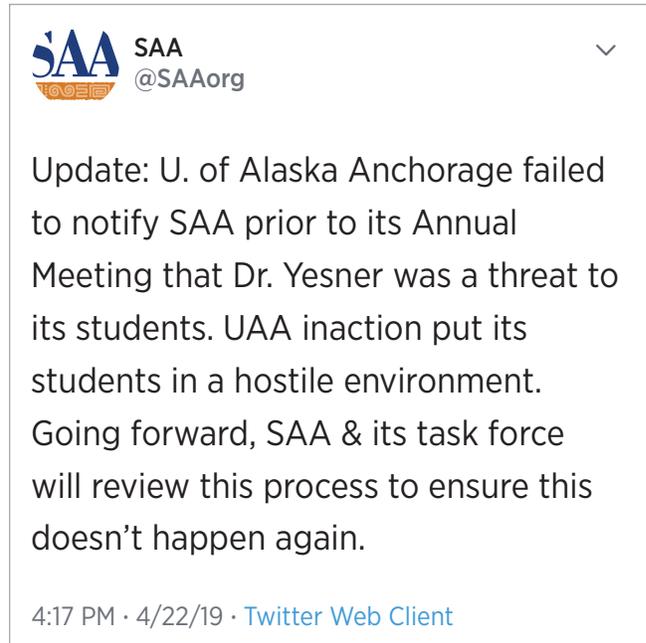


Figure 2. Now-deleted SAA tweet dated April 22, 2019, insinuating the University of Alaska Anchorage, David Yesner's former employer, was to blame for #SAA2019. Re-created from screencapture by Kristina Killgrove on April 22, 2019.

of the SAA's response and their reliance on a weak "anti-harassment policy."⁸ That policy clearly did not prevent #SAA2019, nor did it generate a swift response or ensure the safety and ethical treatment of individuals involved. ASWG's early Twitter direct messages (DMs) discussed SAA's lack of accountability, the absence of an official means for members to organize and demand action, and concerns about the vulnerability of members who were publicly advocating for accountability. Notably, ASWG did not conceive of itself as a group charged with defining detailed policy objectives regarding assault and harassment.⁹ None of us are experts, legal or otherwise, in this area, and we all have varying degrees of professional and personal experience with these topics. Instead, ASWG hoped from the beginning to be a tool for amplifying the voices of all members and to provide new channels for clear communication, transparency, and accountability. From the outset, we have collectively viewed ASWG's role to be a conduit for thinking with all SAA members about how to align the fundamental structure, governance, and accountability of our professional organization with our core values.

As such, ASWG members began to research the SAA's bylaws as a means for action and discovered that existing bylaws did not properly address sexual harassment and assault, despite the

When things get tough, we need members like you to help guide us forward. We've read your emails, open letters, and social media posts and are grateful for your input. We want to encourage members to join us in our efforts to effect much-needed change. That said, the types of change being discussed require that we conduct a civil conversation both online and off. Placing blame or rehashing past mistakes is nowhere near as productive as coming together to figure out what we need to do now.

Figure 3. Portion of official SAA e-mail sent April 30, 2019, from President Joe Watkins to all membership in which the #SAA2019 discourse is implied to be uncivil and unproductive, framed as “placing blame” and “rehashing past mistakes.” Re-created from screencapture by Valerie Bondura on April 30, 2019.

prevalence of both in archaeology (Clancy et al. 2014; Meyers et al. 2018) and the existence of previous SAA task forces charged with developing strong anti-harassment measures. We quickly identified a clause that required a bylaw referendum to go to a member-wide vote if the petition was endorsed by at least 10% of the SAA, or roughly 800 members.

Our first formal action was the Petition to the SAA Board of Directors, initiated May 1, 2019.¹⁰ We drafted this petition in a collaborative Google Doc two weeks after the conference and shared it publicly as a Google Form that collected digital signatures in a Google Sheet. We publicized our petition via social media threads, distributing the risk and labor of organizing among our group, and via e-mail to all SAA members who had signed a previous open letter.¹¹ In the first 24 hours that the ASWG petition was open, it received signatures from over 425 members agreeing that “individuals who are currently sanctioned for assault or harassment by an adjudicating institution (e.g., a university, court, or other recognized adjudicating body) will be barred from taking part in SAA events, including annual meetings. Appeals may be requested in the case of advance registration; on-site registration for such individuals will not be permitted. If a current member is sanctioned for sexual misconduct, their membership may be terminated, subject to the procedures defined in the SAA bylaws, Article IV, Section 13, ‘Termination of Membership.’” Signatures came from SAA member archaeologists working in the United States as well as in 16 other countries, and we reached our goal of 10% of SAA members signing in less than one week.

On May 6, ASWG sent the completed petition to President Watkins and the SAA Board of Directors. On May 22, President Watkins responded via e-mail, indicating that “the petition has far-reaching impacts on the Society beyond just adding language to the Bylaws.” By May 31, President Watkins provided us with a more detailed response, noting that the SAA had convened a Bylaws Committee charged with reviewing the petitioned change. Members of the ASWG have been in touch with the Bylaws Committee, and at least one ASWG member also serves

on the current Task Force on Sexual and Anti-Harassment Policies and Procedures and on the Committee on the Status of Women in Archaeology (COSWA). We are optimistic that our petition will receive due consideration by the SAA Board and that it will be put to a vote of the full membership in the near future.

III. Where We Go from Here

ASWG came together quickly in April 2019 with the express purpose of engaging in a social justice response to the intransigence of the SAA staff and board to #SAA2019. Over the past few months, we have noted a continued lack of transparency in the upper echelons of the SAA. Neither the staff nor the board has suggested that they support our member-led efforts to remedy gaps in the organization’s bylaws. More importantly, however, our coordination through social media has been a source of apparent frustration to SAA leadership, who have framed it repeatedly in public and private communications as uncivil and antagonistic (Figure 3).¹²

ASWG strongly resists this framing. Social media allows us, members who have collectively been a part of the SAA for decades, to instantiate thoughtful and efficient changes in order to shape a professional organization that is (or should be) at its core, member led and member focused. Our social media-based collective enables a radical transparency in which we can advocate for change and converse widely, in sharp contrast to the SAA’s constrained, legalistic, unidirectional approach to #SAA2019. In short, social media is an important tool with which we can continue to build an equitable, safe professional organization that truly reflects our shared values.

We suggest that all SAA members, the SAA Board of Directors, and SAA staff pay close attention to the many and diverse voices of those who make up this organization. In response to our petition and e-mail updates, we have received numerous supportive comments that begin “As a survivor myself . . .” Several respondents praised our efforts to “actually do something” because they were “disgusted with the SAA response.” One wrote that they

“fully support this effort and [are] ashamed of how our organization has handled this.” If ASWG and SAA members are accused of being “uncivil” on social media, it is not because we are a small group of perceived troublemakers; it is because we are leveraging our collective power to amplify hundreds of members’ voices and effect real change in a large, intractable institution that has so far appeared to be averse to fundamental change.

The petitioned bylaws referendum is just the beginning of our quest to reframe the SAA as a truly member-led organization. ASWG is watching closely as the SAA searches for and elects new board members. While we at ASWG all believe we can effect more change on behalf of the SAA membership if we do not stand for board positions, we hope to see a strong slate of nominees for these positions and will be investigating nominees’ stances on sexual harassment, organizational governance, and social media once those names are made public. In addition, the RPA also has an upcoming election, and Kristina Killgrove has been nominated to stand for registrar. We wholeheartedly encourage all SAA and RPA members to research board candidates and to vote accordingly.

The ASWG will continue working to ensure that meaningful change occurs within the SAA, whether through refining bylaws or through challenging assumptions about which members’ voices and which modes of communication are relevant, worthwhile, or part of “civil” conversation. You can participate in and follow our activities by e-mailing us or finding us on Twitter (all of our Twitter handles are provided in our author byline).

Joseph Simone’s (1999) maxim that “institutions don’t love you back” has held true here. Institutions—or people in the upper ranks of them—tend to make decisions that benefit those same institutions rather than individual members. The negative consequences of #SAA2019 are a direct result of institutional decision-making clashing with the ideal outcome that a majority of individual SAA members expected in response to an emergency situation related to gender-based misconduct. We ASWG members love the organization we have been a part of for decades, but by its very nature, it cannot love us back. Only its members can.

#SAA2019 laid bare a division between the SAA as an institution and the SAA as a member collective. ASWG rejects this divide and seeks to overcome it by elevating the voices of members above those of an institutional bureaucracy. It is our strongest hope that the model of collective action we have laid out here will inspire other SAA members to renew their commitment to making the SAA an organization that is reflective of our shared values and goals as professional archaeologists and students.

Notes

1. See, for example, Flaherty 2019a, 2019b; Grens 2019; Wade 2019a, 2019b. A new piece was recently posted at *Inside Higher Ed* (Flaherty 2019c) that deals with the fallout after Elic Weitzel, a graduate student member of the SAA Media Relations Committee, posted to Twitter an SAA e-mail he received in which his comments that SAA solicited were referred to as “engagement, but not in the way we would like.” He has since received a public Twitter apology from @SAAorg.
2. Our group’s name evolved organically from our sincere and repeated expressions of mutual support (and memes). It’s also slightly less than “serious,” pushing against currents of institutional elitism, hierarchy, and tone policing stemming from #SAA2019.
3. Several full timelines of events are published online, including “Summary of David Yesner situation and SAA executive board actions” (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gxa-BYj-dTeCb7w5LLCTUbEwm2v4NyE2uIuCCLy18lw/edit>; Liz Quinlan, April 17, 2019); blog post “That time the Society for American Archaeology blocked me on Twitter” (<https://www.poweredbyosteons.org/2019/04/that-time-society-for-american.html>; Kristina Killgrove, April 26, 2019); and blog post “#SAA2019 and the public face of harassment: thoughts and resources on #metoo and the SAA” (<http://mapabing.org/2019/05/01/saa2019-and-the-public-face-of-harassment-thoughts-and-resources-on-metoo-and-the-saa/>; Nathan Klembara and Patricia Markert, May 1, 2019). The SAA (2019) published a brief news post on April 17 (<https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/saa-media-room/news-article/2019/04/17/dispelling-the-rumors-regarding-dr-david-yesner-s-removal-from-the-saa-meeting>) that included a small part of the timeline of events. We do not dispute this; however, it is only a portion of the timeline, and SAA has not been at all transparent about how, when, and whether they addressed members’ concerns. Because the SAA Board has been tight-lipped, neither we nor any other members know what was discussed during the SAA 2019 annual meeting or what has been discussed since.
4. Adele Cehrs was hired by SAA for an unknown period of time. When she accidentally tweeted a link to her own LinkedIn page, some SAA members active on Twitter noticed. She deleted that tweet, but a screenshot can be found here: <https://twitter.com/DSAArchaeology/status/112549499248984473?s=20>.
5. SAA.org, “A Letter to SAA Members and a Video Message from Joe Watkins” (May 2, 2019). <https://www.saa.org/quick-nav/saa-media-room/news-article/2019/05/02/a-letter-to-saa-members-and-a-video-message-from-joe-watkins>, accessed August 16, 2019.
6. The SAA’s first public acknowledgment of the situation came over 24 hours after complaints about Yesner’s presence were made, and their first statement was posted to SAA.org five days later, after the conference had concluded.

- An e-mail to all membership was not sent until April 30, two weeks after the conference ended. Given the severity of the issue that unfolded at the conference for Yesner's victims and those concerned about their safety, the lack of updates to the conference attendees, members, and journalists present, and the SAA's privileging Yesner's privacy over the needs of the survivors, the SAA's sluggish response surprised many.
7. Blog post "Why Complain?" (<https://feministkilljoys.com/2019/07/22/why-complain/>; Sarah Ahmed, July 22, 2019). See also blog post "Complaint as Diversity Work" (<https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/11/10/complaint-as-diversity-work/>; Sarah Ahmed, November 10, 2017).
 8. The SAA publicly noted that they would be following their existing anti-harassment policy in a Twitter post from user @SAAorg on April 12 at 3:24 p.m. An identical message was also posted to the SAA's official Facebook page. A copy of the SAA's policy can be found at <https://www.saa.org/annual-meeting/submissions/anti-harassment-policy>.
 9. Many committees, individuals, and groups have made specific procedural and policy asks in the wake of #SAA2019, and many ASWG members were directly involved in these related but distinct efforts. See, for example, the SAA Committee on the Status of Women in Archaeology's (COSWA) letter to President Joe Watkins, Executive Director Oona Schmid, and the SAA Board dating April 19, 2019, available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SGWJ0WSRAJPRIyvtCTe6YffqBsGBG-r43mNllkNCY4k/edit?usp=sharing> (accessed August 18, 2019).
 10. ASWG's petition to the SAA Board of Directors: https://web.archive.org/web/20190731183301/https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfi-nOg2yg8gshv9-ZxxwsvtIWESWorjCOfds_Csh6SEldMcw/viewform (accessed August 16, 2019).
 11. The open letter, created and circulated by Dani Bradford and signed by thousands of academics around the world, can be found here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FOUtSgr2LmPqhPl65MdyUIItqztrbt7-e86m64Wwwek/edit> (accessed August 16, 2019).
 12. See also blog post "SAA President Joe Watkins Answers Questions about Why the Organization's Officers Did Nothing at First about the Presence of a Sexual Predator at #SAA2019 and Related Matter" (<http://michael-balter.blogspot.com/2019/05/saa-president-joe-watkins-answers.html>; Michael Balter, May 7, 2019), which publishes an e-mail purportedly from President Watkins suggesting that Twitter is "inflammatory and self-serving," and noting that the ASWG petition is "a knee-jerk reaction to something the SAA needs to craft on its own."

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